



Aspects of Life on the British Home Front Ian Whitehead

Dr Ian Whitehead, from the University of Derby, has written for publication on medical aspects of both world wars. Here, in an extensively abridged version of 'Aspects of the British Homefront' he draws in particular on the Centre's Home Front oral and written recollections to illustrate life and work in the United Kingdom during the war years. Dr Whitehead's full article can be found in ['Everyone's War', the Second World War Experience Centre's journal, Issue 6.](#)

The declaration of war was greeted with none of the jubilation that had been witnessed in some parts of Britain in 1914. Memories of 'the war to end wars' were still fresh, whilst the destructive power of aerial bombing had been brought all too clearly to the public in the images of the Spanish Civil War. It was, however, also a nation largely resigned to the inevitability of conflict with Hitler's Germany. [J. D. Bones](#), remembered his teenage anxieties:

There had been so much talk of cities being bombed to smithereens nobody knew what to expect. I went out into the garden, the sun was shining out of a blue sky with little white clouds, a lovely sunny day. I stood there and wondered what would happen.

The extension of state intervention was more rapid than in the Great War, and was based upon a series of preparatory measures that had been set in train since Munich in 1938. New government departments were established, including Economic Warfare, Information, Food, Home Security and Shipping. Conscription was introduced for men aged between 18 and 40, a blackout was imposed, gas masks had been distributed and the evacuation of over 700,000 children had already begun.

[Dennis Vernals](#) witnessed changes in Sheffield's daily life that were mirrored in towns and cities across the land:

A blackout came into force. Young children were being evacuated into the country. All cinemas, theatres and places where people gathered in large numbers were closed. All schools, colleges and the university were closed.

Any excitement such changes sparked was soon dissipated and the sense of anti-climax that overtook him echoed the general mood.

The blackout was undoubtedly the most visible transformation brought about by the early months of war and one that brought great inconvenience. Every home had to ensure that not



Ethel Wappet was an Air Raid Warden in a village called Drybeck in Cumbria. She relished the responsibility this work entailed.



a chink of light was visible. Any negligence in this respect would be rewarded by a visit from the police or a member of the Air Raid Wardens Service, which had been established in 1937, when the British government had begun to confront the real possibility of war. "Put that light out!" was the usual command to any transgressor. A source of irritation for some and of humour for others, the blackout also had tragic consequences, as it was through deaths on the road rather than bombing that the War struck its early civilian victims.

The greatest social upheaval occasioned by the early days of war resulted from evacuation, which had gained momentum in the summer of 1939, as people sought refuge from probable target towns and cities. By early September, as many as 3,750,000 individuals were estimated to have joined the exodus. The official movement of children and mothers with children under five began two days prior to the declaration of war. Despite Government encouragement to participate, the evacuation schemes proved generally less popular than anticipated. For those who were evacuated, however, there began an adventure that was far happier for some than for others.

Little consideration was given to the appropriateness of the billeting households to receive the evacuees - housing the children anywhere that could be found was the only consideration. The random nature of the billeting meant that there were many social and cultural clashes between foster families and their charges. Particularly apparent was the class divide. The experience of evacuation exposed the gulf between the 'haves' and 'have nots' of the 1930s.

Evacuation had turned out to be a failure. By early 1940, huge numbers of mothers and children had flocked back home. Families had found it difficult being separated; poorer families could not bear the costs involved in visiting, or meet the demands for extra cash from some foster families; and the tensions between evacuees and their hosts sometimes proved insoluble.

In April 1940, the 'phoney' war had ended and by June Britain stood alone. Only the spirit of Dunkirk appeared to give the people something positive to focus on, and it was invoked regularly, in the propaganda of summer 1940, to galvanise the nation for the struggles ahead. A new leadership was also in place to lead this fight. The Chamberlain government had come under increasing criticism for a lack of urgency in its response to the war emergency and had finally fallen in May 1940. Winston Churchill headed the new Coalition.

Everyone understood that Britain would be the next to face the German onslaught, and defeatist talk was to be heard. [J. D. Bones](#) found this negative attitude in some older men at work, veterans of 1914-1918:



Ethel Wappet's ARP box, still in perfect condition. It was donated to the Centre by her niece, Maureen Quinn in 2002.



They just said there was nowhere to fight now. They were conditioned to the fighting in trenches like the First World War, but I remember we younger ones were most indignant at the thought of giving in.

Despite Britain's isolation, it appears that the more positive attitude was by far the prevalent view. There was a feeling that Britain, unencumbered by Allies, could now face the enemy and draw on the experience of having beaten them once before. One man was heard to observe, "Anyhow, sir, we're in the Final, and it's to be played on the Home Ground".

Britain was now on full invasion alert and a raft of precautions and defensive measures were set in place. In Falmouth, [Frank Colenso](#) was one of a number of local boys, whose familiarity with the local area made them ideal recruits for the cycling patrols. They rode silently through the darkness, "looking for the unusual". Spy fever gripped the nation, and propaganda warned the populace that 'dangerous talk costs lives'.

Among those British citizens most actively engaged in the building of Britain's defences were the members of the Local Defence Volunteers (later the Home Guard). Anthony Eden had made the call for volunteers on 14 May. The response had been immense, with around one and a half million men coming forward by the end of the following month.

Initially, if the Home Guard had any weapons at all, they were armed with .22 Lee Enfields, familiar to those who had seen service in the first war. Later, Britain took delivery of rifles from North America, which ensured that more Home Guard units became armed. [Frank Colenso](#), who, aged sixteen, had graduated from the cycling patrols to the Home Guard, began practising with a Lee Enfield and was then given his own .300 Springfield. He regularly attended weapons practice with other enthusiastic young recruits:

We practised with live grenade throwing (Mills bomb) and also used cup-dischargers, fitted to our rifle muzzles, which would project a Mills grenade, fitted with a base disc to fit the cup, quite an extended range, being propelled by a special cartridge, but it was a bit hard on the old WWI rifle stocks, giving quite a kick. We enjoyed the shooting on the rifle ranges ... once our developing sixteen-year-old shoulders got toughened to the powerful recoil of our .303 and .300 cartridges. I often carried off the first, second or third prize - the money (only a couple of bob maybe) coming from the tuppence we all had put into a kitty. It was an incentive to improve our aim.

Later, his Springfield rifle was replaced by a Canadian Ross and he found that, "with its unusual, quick, straight bolt action, I could loose off very rapid shots at the same target with good results ... On the other hand, I could do badly, when gasping for breath after a hundred yard run in gas mask, with eye-piece steamed up and askew, and miss the target altogether".

In the summer of 1940, guerrilla units, The Secret Army, had been set up by the Home Guard, to undertake sabotage operations. They were equipped with high explosives and had a network of weapons dumps and hideouts. In October 1942, Colenso transferred to a guerrilla platoon, taking part in his first exercise: "Ambushed the other platoon. Shot! ... Not bad. Blacked out face with burnt cork and wore my 'Commando' woolly hat".

The Battle of Britain, which began in July 1940, raged on through August and September, with the dogfights often taking place in full view of the people on the ground. The crux



came on 15 September, when the RAF successfully broke up a large German bomber offensive on the capital. Although the daylight raids continued into October, any German plans for an invasion had now been abandoned, and the focus of German tactics shifted to night-time bombing - the Blitz.

The initial raids centred on London and the capital bore the brunt throughout the Blitz, but the Luftwaffe also hit several other British cities. In November 1940, the devastating attack on Coventry took the British air defences by surprise. [Barbara Davies](#), directed to Coventry on war work, was struck by the scale of destruction that awaited her:

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 had prepared me for the shock of Coventry.

The bombing of Coventry, with its ruined Cathedral, became emblematic of the provincial Blitz. By May 1941, however, Hitler's bombs had struck Manchester, Liverpool, Sheffield, Glasgow, Belfast, Cardiff, Birmingham, Southampton, Bristol, Portsmouth, Bath, Plymouth, Exeter, Nottingham, Newcastle, Sunderland, Middlesborough, Hull, Ipswich and Norwich.

The emergency services were augmented by civilians who had to register to join the fire, police, ambulance or civil defence services. [Dennis Vernals](#) chose the fire service and was employed as a messenger. As soon as the sirens sounded he had to report to the station and go out with one of their fire appliances. He acted as a runner for the Officer-in-Charge.

On the whole, the Blitz united people in a sense of community spirit, in defiance of the enemy action. By the middle of 1941, it was clear that bombing was not going to break Britain. The Blitz ended in May 1941. The *Luftwaffe's* raids were not over, but the worst was certainly past. However, a new terror arrived later in the War, for those living in the south, in the shape of the German V bombs. As in the Blitz, although there was understandable fear, with both the V1s and the V2s the people, by and large, adopted a fatalistic "if your name's on it" attitude.

Morale had generally held up. There had been slumps, sometimes occasioned by wild rumours about the casualty rates. In the early days of the Blitz, when it looked like the East End was going to bear the brunt, there were real signs of a collapse. Churchill and the King and Queen were booed on some of their visits to the bombed areas. But, as the *Luftwaffe* spread its attention into west London and the suburbs, the tension was relieved. Even Buckingham Palace was bombed. There was a real sense that all classes were suffering together.



Ethel Wappet's Civil Defence arm band and badge.



The Blitz had brought further disruption for the nation's schoolchildren. Most schools had closed at the outbreak of war until shelters had been constructed. There had also been the disarray caused by evacuation, including the increased pressure on rural schools. Further change was occasioned by the loss of young male teachers to the forces. They were replaced by elderly retired teachers and also by an influx of women into the teaching profession.

Every effort was made to maintain educational standards. However, the rising class sizes and the shortage of teachers undoubtedly took their toll. Family life was, of course, greatly disrupted. Fathers were either away in the forces (some never to return) or so heavily occupied in essential war work that they had little time with their children. Many Mothers were also juggling family responsibilities with employment in industry.

For adult males, the War did not necessarily mean conscription into the armed services. Men working in crucial war industries often found that they were designated as in 'reserved occupations', whilst many skilled men, made unemployed in the 1930s, were redirected into the nation's factories. The deployment of the male workforce was overseen by the Ministry of Labour, under Ernest Bevin.

One of the most famous directives involved the mining industry. A balloting scheme was introduced whereby some young men, eligible for military service, were instead chosen to work in the mines - they became known as the 'Bevin boys'. Altogether 21,000 youths were compulsorily set to work in the pits, with a further 16,000 volunteering. These mostly seventeen-year-old lads were quickly trained, but only around a third ever became sufficiently skilled to work at the actual coalface, where the demand for labour was greatest.

Some men, however, were never at ease with their status as directed or reserved labour. They were irked at being denied the chance to fight the enemy alongside their contemporaries. [Jack S.](#) a miner from South Yorkshire, had been refused entry into the Navy, because mining was a reserved occupation. Frustrated, he ran away to Liverpool, hoping he could join the Merchant Navy. However, he was caught by the police and sent back to Yorkshire, where he had to face a pit tribunal:

I was tried ... for being away for ten weeks, and I was fined a pound and told if I did nothing wrong in a month I could have it back, and then I was tried at Doncaster Court ... I was bound over for two years ... because it was essential work. So it was like desertion ... I came out of the courthouse and said 'I still don't want to go down pit' but they forced us. I told the judge ... 'put me in the Army, I don't want no training. Send me overseas because I am that eager to go in the forces'.



Make Do and Mend leaflet No 4 issued by the Board of Trade and donated to the Centre by Mrs M. Allin



The mobilisation of the female population was an important factor in the success of the British war effort. Over two million women were engaged in the war economy, meeting the increased demand for labour, as well as replacing men conscripted into the forces.

A range of employment options was now open to women. [Barbara Davies](#) wanted to be a nurse. However, her family could not afford to support her through the training. She was attracted into industry by the financial incentives, others were attracted to outdoor work. Betty Radley had always wanted to be in the fresh air and was determined to avoid factory employment. Consequently, she signed up for the Women's Timber Corps. She was based at the largest sawmill in the New Forest. The work involved loading timber into railway trucks and stripping the bark for telegraph poles. By the age of eighteen, she had been put in charge of the sawmill. She was now responsible for classifying the species of the felled trees and measuring their length and width. These measurements had to be converted into cubic feet and were used to calculate the sawyers' pay, as they were paid on a piece work basis.

Whilst the social mobility and change evidenced above were undeniable, we should be wary of exaggerating the impact. Undoubtedly, women gained from the wider employment opportunities that opened up, and a larger proportion stayed in work after 1945 than had done so after 1918, but this was probably a reflection of wider economic circumstances than evidence of a major shift in attitudes concerning women's position in the workforce. As in the First World War, employers and trade unions alike had viewed the influx of women as a temporary expedient.

Aside from their war work, women had also to continue with their domestic role, often with added household responsibilities, if their fathers and husbands were away in the forces. The War was a far from liberating experience for many women. Given these burdens, it is not surprising that many women were happy to be freed from their war employment in 1945. In any case, many subscribed to the view that they should make way for the returning men.

On the other hand, it is clear that a significant minority of women, particularly from the younger generation, felt that they should be allowed to remain in so-called male spheres of employment. The war years had brought some degree of social and financial independence for these young, single women.

As housewives and mothers, it was women too who faced the challenges of feeding and clothing the family, which arose following the introduction of rationing in January 1940. The first provisions to be rationed were sugar, butter and bacon. These were closely followed by cheese and eggs. Clothes were also rationed, giving rise to the *Utility* garments. Clothes rationing was based on a points scheme. For the Government, this had the flexibility of controlling demand for scarce items - the less available something



Easy to Make Slippers for the Whole Family, issued by the Board of Trade and donated to the Centre by Mrs M. Allin.



became, the higher the points were set. At the same time, the system allowed for a degree of customer freedom, allowing people to use their allotted points as they saw fit. Petrol had been placed on ration three weeks after the War began. In 1942, the screw was tightened still further, with the abolition of the basic civilian petrol ration. The same year saw the addition of sweets, chocolate and soap to the growing list of rationed items. Certain goods were never rationed during the War years. These included bread, potatoes, tobacco and beer. However, the latter was watered down and its price inflated by excise duties. Coal was not placed on the ration, following a sustained campaign of Conservative led opposition to proposed schemes for fuel control.

Everyone had a ration book. There were green ones for babies, blue ones for children and buff ones for adults. Those who could afford it could, of course, seek to circumvent rationing by paying higher prices for goods on the black market. Lord Woolton, the Food Minister, was confident that, as a result of careful enforcement of the rules, the black market accounted for a small proportion of total supply. The so-called grey market of under the counter favouritism to selected customers was possibly more widespread.

The Dig for Victory campaign had been launched at the outbreak of the War, to encourage people to supplement their diets with homegrown produce. People dug up their lawns and turned them into vegetable plots. Spare land in parks and other public spaces was also turned over to agricultural use. Many people began keeping chickens and rabbits.

Paper was in short supply. Many comics stopped production and newspapers were greatly reduced in size. [J. D. Bones](#) found that his paper round got much easier as a consequence. The Ministry of Supply began an appeal for the public to donate old books, which could be pulped, with special committees established to ensure that no precious items were destroyed.

Information leaflets were issued by the Ministry of Food, including a war cookery leaflet on how cheese could be served in dishes for breakfast, lunch and dinner! The Ministry also employed food advisers. These were trained home economists, whose role was to demonstrate ways in which interesting and nutritional meals could be made, despite the constraints of rationing. In 1941, the Government had established *British Restaurants*. The purpose was to provide cheap and nutritious meals for the workforce, and they were usually located near to factories.

Although rationing was an inconvenience, it was generally popular. It was seen as a clear sign of the Government's commitment to running the War along fair lines. For many in the working classes, it also had the unintended benefit of providing a balanced diet that was healthier than the one they had known in pre-war years.

At the outbreak of war, places of entertainment, such as theatres and cinemas, were closed. However, they soon reopened. The cinema was the most popular form of entertainment for the working class, with films offering an escape from the War being the most popular. Dances and concerts, put on by organisations such as the YMCA, also offered welcome opportunities to socialise. The sporting calendar was, however, greatly reduced. Within the home, radio was the most important form of mass entertainment, with popular shows such as *ITMA*.



Significant improvements took place in the working class standard of living, particularly for unskilled workers. The improving indices for infant and maternal mortality were a good indicator of this. Subsidised school meals and free milk for mothers and babies were introduced. Factory canteens also boosted adult diets. Widespread vaccination schemes were begun, when real fears arose about epidemics taking hold amongst those displaced by bombing. The industrial workforce also benefited from improved medical provision in the factories. Thus, there were significant social benefits, for the mass of the population, arising from the Total War experience.

Many Labour ministers, and politicians on the reformist wing of the Conservative Party, were determined to capitalise on this impetus to social reform. There is some debate on how far the War had created a new political consensus in Britain, but by 1945 it appeared unlikely that any post-war government would fail to implement a Welfare State of some kind. From 1942 onwards, the British people, no longer concerned with simply avoiding defeat, were looking to life after victory. The publication of the Beveridge Report added to the increasingly widespread view that state intervention, which had been so successful in wartime, should be harnessed for good in peacetime. The Labour Party was the clear political beneficiary of this public mood, the Conservatives being associated with the unemployment and perceived failures of the 1930s. The War had helped to tilt the political direction leftwards, resulting in the landslide victory for Labour in 1945. To many observers, both in Britain and abroad, this looked like ingratitude to Churchill. But, the public was rejecting his party, not the man himself. Indeed, some respondents to pollsters in 1945 made it clear that they would have happily kept Churchill as Prime Minister, so long as they could have a Labour Government.

As Malcolm Smith argues, in terms of visions of British society, the War had bequeathed two conflicting legacies: collectivism and Churchillian individualism. In 1945, collectivism appeared to be much the more powerful of the two. However, wartime propaganda probably exaggerated the extent of the national unity that had been forged in the war years. Certainly, Britons had come together in a common purpose to a degree that was unprecedented. But, the War had not overturned the social fabric of the nation - it had not created new communities. Indeed, victory itself had helped to reinforce many traditional attitudes and institutions. As the War faded into memory, the community spirit of those years rapidly faded with it. Viewed from the standpoint of 2002, it is perhaps individualism rather than collectivism that appears as the increasingly more dominant legacy.



Ministry of food leaflet No. 2, 'Cooking White Fish'. Donated to the Centre by Mrs M. Allin.



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