

Brent's women at war and at peace, 1914-1919.

When the First World War broke out in 1914 there were many, mainly single, women working as domestic servants or in shops and laundries. Despite fears for the safety of their men, most believed that the war against Germany was right. The Suffragette movement gave up its militant campaign over votes for women, and fully supported the war effort. The role of married women and mothers was seen as to '*keep the home fires burning*', to look after their families, and to knit socks and scarves for men at The Front.

By 1915 over one million men had volunteered for the forces, and women took on some of the office jobs they vacated. Others followed the example of Florence Nightingale, from the Crimean War sixty years earlier, and became nurses. The Trades Unions did not want to see women taking over traditional male industrial tasks, and many employers guaranteed that men who volunteered would get their old jobs back when they returned from military service.

From January 1916 even the two million who had volunteered by then were not enough, and conscription was introduced, with men being called up for military service or essential war work. To help fill the gaps, on the land and in transport, more female workers were needed. Miss Lumley of Ealing Road left her clerical job to train as a farm worker, earning the nickname "the Corduroy Girl".

Article from the "Harrow Observer", 3 March 1916.
[Source: Brent Archives local newspaper microfilms]

"THE CORDUROY GIRL."
Miss Lumley, daughter of Mr. A. A. Lumley, of Runnymede, Ealing-road, Wembley, described as "The Corduroy Girl," is one of the active pioneers of the movement for getting women workers on the land. Miss Lumley had a brilliant career at a lady's college at Hastings, gaining the Senior Oxford certificate, giving her the title of Associate of Arts of Oxford University, and also certificates of the Royal Academy of Music and Royal College of Music.



At the age of 18 (the lowest age for a woman clerkship) she passed fifth out of 322 candidates for the Civil Service, gaining the highest marks of them all for French. She gave up her career in order to be trained for the new movement, and she is now one of the girl farmers being trained by the National Land Council. She has been at the farming for eight weeks, and it has improved her physique wonderfully. She was one of the speakers at the recent meeting in Kensington Town Hall.



A female conductor pictured beside her Sudbury to Paddington tram, around 1918.
[Source: Brent Archives – Wembley History Society collection.]

Other women were hired on temporary contracts as “conductorettes” on the buses and trams. The Metropolitan and Underground Railways also took on women workers, first to work in ticket offices, but then also as train guards.

Woman railway guard working at Neasden, around 1916.
[Photograph by A Reavil, from “London’s Metropolitan Railway” by Alan A Jackson, 1986.]



As the war effort intensified, the fields of the Royal Agricultural Show Ground at Park Royal were taken over for war use, and munitions factories were built. The largest of these, in Acton Lane, employed seven thousand people, mainly women, so that mothers had to be recruited as well. In February 1917 a nursery opened at Barrett’s Green Road, Lower Place, which was:

‘... designed to provide a home for the children of munition workers living in Willesden, whilst their parents are busy helping to win the war. It has been furnished by the Ministry of Munitions and the Willesden Urban District Council, and is open every day and night, including Saturdays and Sundays.’

Youngsters from a few weeks up to five years old were cared for, and the charge was sixpence per child for each twelve hour day or night session.



A group in the playground



The Toddlers



Dinner time

Photographs from the brochure produced by Willesden U.D.C. for the Day and Night Nursery at Lower Place in 1917.

[Source: Brent Archives – Welfare/Children boxfile LHC1/WEL/4.]

Both men and women on essential war work were issued with an "on war service" badge. The men wore it on their lapel, so that they would not be accused of being cowards because they were not in uniform. Women also wore it with pride, but as a brooch or hat pin, as can be seen in some of the photographs below.



An "On War Service" badge from 1916.
[Source: Brent Museum ref. 1977/204.]

By 1917 there were aircraft factories at Cricklewood (Handley Page), North Wembley (Hoopers) and several in Kingsbury. The Aircraft Manufacturing Company ("Airco") at Grove Park was employing 4,400 people in 1918, more than half of them women. It was probably the largest aircraft factory in the world at that time, producing over forty aeroplanes a week. As Kingsbury was a mainly rural area then, many of the workers had to travel to work by tram from Willesden or Kilburn, and others came by bicycle. In most parts of the works, the women were supervised by male charge-hands and foremen, but a Miss Levy appears to have been in charge of the Streamline Wire Department.



The girls and ladies of the Streamline Wire Department at "Airco" in 1918.
[Source: Brent Archives – "Airco Rag" illustrations.]

Not all of the women were "working class", and among those from well-off backgrounds was Muriel Perrin, whose family lived in Kensington. She was a gifted artist, working as a draughtswoman, who also drew some illustrations for the staff magazine, the "Airco Rag", including the cover celebrating the end of the war (see next page).



Muriel Perrin's "Peace" cover drawing.
[Source: Brent Archives – "Airco Rag" illustrations.]

The outbreak of peace quickly saw the munitions factories closed, and women workers at "Airco" laid off as orders for military aircraft were cancelled. One of their male colleagues wrote:
'... not one of us can fail to miss the hundreds of girls in their coloured overalls and bonnets. Every week has found a number of girls demobilising from their share of war-work with the Firm. Many of these girls have done yeoman service, having been here upwards of three years.'



"Paint Shop" workers at "Airco", around 1918.
[Source: Brent Archives – "Airco Rag" illustrations.]

Within a year after November 1918, the London General Omnibus Company and its linked companies had ended the contracts of all 4,600 of the women they had employed, as men returned from the war. They were given a farewell party, and each was given a certificate to commemorate their service, but many of the sacked women were upset at the loss of a regular income, which had helped them to feed their families properly.



Workers from the "Wood Shop" at the Aircraft Manufacturing Company in Kingsbury, with their foreman in the centre, photographed around 1918.
[Source: Brent Archives – "Airco Rag" illustrations.]

For Miss Perrin, peace came in a different way. She was one of several young women at "Airco" who died in March 1919, victims of the Spanish 'Flu pandemic. Her efforts, and those of thousands of others, had shown what local women were capable of at work, and even men had to admit this, however reluctantly. As one wrote in the "Airco Rag":

'During the War there was often a time when the foremen of these works didn't praise their efforts to any extent; still, it is known that within their heart of hearts they realised full well the good work they were doing. Good luck to all of them wherever they may have gone!'

**Philip Grant,
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This is a more detailed version of a "Secret History" article written for the November 2008 edition of the Brent Magazine, to commemorate the 90th anniversary of the Armistice which ended the First World War.

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Websites:

- www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk – An excellent site for history from 1900 to 1999.
- www.brent.gov.uk/archives – Brent Archive, including online images collection.
- www.iwmcollections.org.uk/civilians – Part of the Imperial War Museum's collection.