

EMA for A329: The Making of Welsh History

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'Women of Britain. Come into the factories': What did it mean to be a working-class woman on the Welsh 'home front'? Examining the impact the experience of the interwar years and Second World War had on the gender identities and dynamics of the working classes in Urban South Wales, 1939 – 1945.

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Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	3
Introduction.....	4
1: DE-MOBILISATION, DEPRESSION, AND THE RETURN OF THE HOME FRONT	9
2: WAR AND THE DOMESTIC SPHERE	18
CONCLUSION	26
APPENDIX	29
Bibliography:.....	31

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Introduction

This dissertation examines the impact of World War Two (WW2) on the women of Wales and the extent to which it informed their identities between 1939 and 1945. The research focuses on the extent to which WWII acted as a vector of societal change, particularly in gender dynamics, with a specific emphasis on the effect living on the 'Home Front' has on the working classes in South Wales.

Governmental mandates like the National Service (Armed Forces) Act of 1939¹ compelled British men between the ages of eighteen and forty-one years to enrol for National Service, thereby necessitating the transformation in women's roles to ensure the continuation of essential wartime production in areas such as munitions and food supply. This dissertation will ask how the British government appealed to the masses in response to the heightened production demands during WWII, and how the Welsh population responded to the call of patriotic duty. Queen Elizabeth's 1939 address to the Women of the Empire in which she stated 'war has at all times called for the fortitude of Women' [...] 'we, no less than men, have vital work to do'² underscored the vital contribution expected of women during wartime. and Propaganda campaigns like 'Women of Britain: Come into the Factories'³ sought to instil a national sense of responsibility, with a targeted appeal to women.

Following the end of World War One (WW1), the 'interwar period saw little change in the lives of women'⁴, who largely returned to their roles as mothers and housewives. However, this study will

¹ Exemptions of conscription included those who were medically unfit and those in reserved occupations.

² First broadcast on BBC Home Service News on Armistice Day 1939, recording available at: [BBC Home Service News- HM Queen Elizabeth Calls on Women- HM Queen Elizabeth Calls on Women- BBC Sounds](#)

³ Zec, P. (1941) *Women of Britain- Come into the Factories* [Poster]. Available at: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/38928>. (Accessed: 10 March 2024) – see appendix for image.

⁴ Deirdre Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows A History of Women in Twentieth-Century Wales*. (Cardiff:2007) . p.107.

examine to what extent Welsh women's inter-war experience prepared them for the challenges faced during WW2, such as rationing of food, fuel, and clothing.

Considering the prevailing Anglo-centric and patriarchal historical narratives of the interwar and WW2 years, this dissertation delves into the experiences of Welsh women amidst pivotal occurrences such as Swansea's tumultuous 'Three Nights of Hell' in February 1941 and the air raids on Cardiff. To what degree did these shared ordeals strengthen the identities of Welsh women, and how far-reaching was WW2 in cultivating a wider sense of unity, not solely among Welsh women but also within the cohesive fabric of the broader British female community?

What were the perceptions and experiences of women, especially those with absent husbands, concerning support while engaging in war-related responsibilities? Furthermore, to what degree did these women receive assistance as working parents, not solely from their local communities but also from governmental sources? The Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) played a crucial role within Welsh neighbourhoods, delivering practical aid to individuals impacted by the consequences of bombing raids or scarcity of essential goods due to wartime rationing. Within the National Archive, informational brochures are on record, guiding women affiliated with the WVS on strategies to aid their respective communities⁵

Traditional historical discourse argued that World War Two 'meant a new economic and social freedom for women'⁶ However, later historiography suggests that little changed for women because of the conflict. Beddoe's *Out of the Shadows* is a study of the lives of women in Wales during the twentieth century. Chapter 3, *Sacrifice and Solidarity, 1919-1939*, outlines the significant changes that occurred during the interwar years and Chapter 4, *Tipping the Scales against Hitler: The Second World War, 1939-1945*, explores key events and the impact on the lives of Welsh women, the core of her

⁵ <https://www-nationalarchives-gov-uk.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/education/resources/home-front-1939-1945-part-two/advice-from-the-womens-voluntary-services/>

⁶ Arthur Marwick, *War and Social Change in the Twentieth Century: A Comparative Study of Britain, France Germany, Russia and the United States* (London:1976) p.160

argument being that 'the lives' [...] 'of Welsh women' [...] 'remained the same'⁷. *Our Mothers' Land* (John (ed.), 1991)⁸ is a collection of essays focusing on Women in Wales between 1830-1939 and contains an essay by Beddoe⁹ which gives an overview of the challenges faced by women in the interwar years. Whilst *A Forgotten Army*, follows on from the period covered by John's book and covers the 'hard work and personal sacrifices of the *'forgotten army'*¹⁰. Further works such as *Wales in World War 2*¹¹ and *When Wales Went to War*¹², provide valuable insight into the everyday lives of the people who lived in South Wales during WW2.

Chapter one will briefly study the position of Welsh women during the interwar years. Wales was in the grip of an economic depression, with the industrial coalfields of south Wales being heavily impacted. This study will use statistical information to demonstrate the scale of unemployment and examine the work of historians such as Davies and John to explore the historiographical debates surrounding the impact this period had on the gender dynamics of the people of South Wales.

Chapter One in Mari Williams' work *'A Forgotten Army'* gives insight into the social and economic conditions in Wales pre-WW2 with emphasis on the female experience¹³, whilst Beddoe explores the impact of the Restoration of the Pre-War Practices Act¹⁴ had on the women of Wales. It will also examine how the British government ensured that the demand for wartime production was met and what impact participation in the home front had on gender and family dynamics. It will analyse statistical information about the kind of work that was being done and by whom.

Chapter two will focus on how the wartime experience affected the domestic sphere of the women of South Wales and examine if their interwar experiences prepared them for the challenges that WW2 presented. Historians such as Williams have argued that the outbreak of War was positive for the

⁷ Beddoe, *Out of The Shadows*, p.108

⁸ Angela, V. John. (ed) *Our Mothers' Land: Chapters in Welsh Women's History 1830-1939*. (Cardiff:1991)

⁹ Dierdre Beddoe. In *Munitionettes, Maids and Mams: Women in Wales, 1914-1939* in A. John. *Our Mothers Land. Chapters in Welsh Women's History. 1830-1939*. (Cardiff: 1991) pp. 189-209.

¹⁰ Williams, 2002, p261.

¹¹ Quentin Deakin, (2023). *Wales in World War 2*. (Cyf: Talybont:2023).

¹² John O'Sullivan. *When Wales Went to War*. (Stroud: 2004).

¹³ Mari. A, Williams, *A Forgotten Army, Female Munitions Workers of South Wales 1939-1945*. (Cardiff: 2002).

¹⁴ Deirdre Beddoe, in *Wales Between the Wars*. Edited by T. Herbert and G.E. Jones. (Cardiff: 1988) pp. 129-160

women of Wales and quotes Iorwerth Thomas, who stated in 1944, that the 'underfed women' [...] 'are now engaged in feeding the war machine'.¹⁵ Following the hardships endured during the depression, did the outbreak of World War Two afford women more freedom, who supported women's empowerment and was there significant opposition to women entering traditional bastions of masculinity? It will explore the impact participation in war work had on the traditional roles of the family and if this was a source of conflict between the genders.

Much has been written about the interwar and World War Two years and many sources can be drawn upon to demonstrate the impact war had on the people of Britain. However, this dissertation aims to narrow down my research primarily to the women of South Wales. UK Parliamentary Papers, such as the Report on 'Persons in Receipt of Poor Relief (England and Wales) dated 14 July 1938'¹⁶, are useful in providing statistics on the levels of unemployment leading up to the outbreak of World War Two. Newspapers are an excellent primary source and can offer a level of nuance that official documentation does not and can be found at Newspapers.com¹⁷ They present a more personal perspective than government statistics offer and highlight the involvement of women in the war effort from a bottom-up perspective.

Ministry of Information (MOI) reports¹⁸, provide both the daily Home Intelligence reports and the Wartime Social Surveys, commissioned by the government to gain insight into the thoughts and reactions of the people towards the war. This form of Mass observation is useful in giving a broad-brush view of the sentiments of the population at a given time. Online depositories such as The Peoples Collection¹⁹ are an excellent source for photographs and oral histories that span the period of research. Propaganda images produced by the governments during the early war period are interesting in the way in which they target women and offer insight into the extent to which women

¹⁵ Williams, (2002) p.57, citing Councillor Iorwerth Thomas of Cwm-parc, Rhondda, September 1944.

¹⁶ [U.K. Parliamentary Papers document \(open.ac.uk\)](#) Report dated 14th July 1938 – Number of persons in England and Wales in receipt of Poor Relief

¹⁷ [Historical Newspapers from the 1700's-2000s- Newspapers.com](#)

¹⁸ [Home- Mass Observation Online- Mass Observation Online \(open.ac.uk\)](#)

¹⁹ [A People's Story of Wales | Peoples Collection Wales](#)

were a crucial part of the war effort. Sites such as The Imperial War Museum hold records of several campaigns. Oral Histories are another important resource, an Interview with Mrs Eira John, is an inciteful portrayal of how the outbreak of WW2 affected the women of Wales²⁰.

²⁰ John, E. (2012) 'Voices from the Factory Floor'. Interview with Mrs Eira John. Interviewed by Catrin Stevens for *Womens archive of Wales*, 11 October. Available at: [Eira John. Voices from the Factory Floor | Peoples Collection Wales](#) (Accessed: 15 April 2024)

1: DE-MOBILISATION, DEPRESSION, AND THE RETURN OF THE HOME FRONT

After WWI ended on November 11th, 1918, women who had expected major social change and equal rights, were reluctantly pushed back into a domestic role. To make sense of Welsh women's responses to the challenges presented to them by WW2, it is important to evaluate their position during the interwar years. Beddoe claims that during the interwar years 'the lives' [...] 'of Welsh women' [...] 'stayed the same'.²¹ Once a proud industrial nation, defined by its coal-producing heritage, Wales was, like the rest of Britain, subjected to a sustained period of economic depression that hit the working-class communities of South Wales hard. This chapter will explore how the end of WWI affected women in South Wales, both at home and at work, and how the so-called 'hungry thirties' influenced gender dynamics during the interwar years. Moreover, this analysis will investigate how the government and the people prepared for the upcoming global conflict of WW2, by reviewing contemporary news articles and government propaganda campaigns, ending with the argument that despite some hopes otherwise, the First World War did not bring about significant social change or equal rights.

WWI claimed the lives of over thirty-five thousand Welsh men and many of the survivors were wounded or traumatised by the horrors of trench warfare.²² Working-class men returning from the front line were expected to resume their pre-war civilian work roles. The role women had played in the war effort appeared to be quickly forgotten. Beddoe argued there was a prevalent belief that women had risen above their station and 'had to be knocked back into shape and into a position of dependency on men'.²³ Despite the crucial contribution women had made to the WWI home front, after the war ended little had changed. Women who had hoped for post-war emancipation from their

²¹ Dierdre Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows A History of Women in Twentieth-Century Wales*. (Cardiff, 2000) p.108

²² The National Library of Wales (2024) *The Welsh National Book of Remembrance* Available at: [The Welsh National Book of Remembrance- National Library of Wales](https://www.nlw.gov.uk/remember)

²³ Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p.74

domestic chains soon discovered that WWI simply meant that 'patriarchal attitudes had merely been put on ice'.²⁴

The claim by Beddoe that the First World War did not achieve much for gender equality is backed up by Higonnet et.al, in a series of essays, *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*.²⁵ Higonnet compares gender dynamics during wartime to a 'Double Helix' and presents a framework relating gender relations during wartime to the structure of the double helix, like DNA, to explain the persistence of gender hierarchy despite apparent changes. From this perspective, it could be argued that War did not offer an opportunity for change for women, but rather maintained the status quo of separate spheres. This argument supports the assumption that Women's move into war work was necessary due to men being moved into a combat role, thus their change in status was incidental rather than progressive. Whilst women's role during the War had been pivotal to the war effort, their contribution would always remain subordinate to the superior Male military role, so whilst women's roles may have been altered by the conflict, it was but a temporary measure and the gender hierarchy would remain intact.

Enacted in the aftermath of WWI, the Restoration of Pre-War Practices Act (1919) was a legislative measure designed to reinstate pre-war employment practices that had been suspended to maximise industrial output during the conflict. Whilst the Act did not explicitly prohibit women's employment, it mandated the restoration of pre-war practices, which often entailed replacing female workers with returning servicemen, stipulating 'that all pre-war customs which were given up during the War, and in connection with the purposes of the War, shall be restored by every employer throughout the country',²⁶ thus effectively limiting women's participation in the workforce and relegating them to domestic roles. However, the Bill did not go unopposed with the House of Commons, Major. Edward

²⁴ Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p.75

²⁵

²⁶ House of Commons Debate dated 2nd June 1919: Restoration of Pre-War Practices (No.3) Bill, available at: <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1919/jun/02/restoration-of-pre-war-practices-no-3> Accessed: 15 May 2024.

Wood, a Conservative member of the house, appealed on behalf of women affected by the legislation stating that ‘what they do resent is that this Bill should establish a sex bar, debarring them from engaging in industry at the very moment when the doors of other professions are being opened to their richer sisters’, with Mr Acland reinforcing Wood’s appeal by acknowledging that women were anxious that ‘belonging to the female sex shall not by itself debar them’ from fulfilling roles that were newly created during the War years.²⁷

Nevertheless, women made some progress during the inter-war years. The Representation of the People Act (1918) granted the vote to most women over thirty years old, although contrary to the popular myth that the vote was a ‘reward’ for women’s service in the war, it was mainly achieved following 60 years of struggle by women’s rights activists. Despite being a significant step towards universal suffrage, the victory was only partial, as women remained unequal to men, who could now vote over the age of twenty.²⁸ Women’s equality remained on the back foot, and as the interwar years progressed, despite legislation such as the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act, 1919, (SD(R) A)²⁹, which removed marriage bars from professional careers such as Law and Medicine, which opened up a limited scope of work for a small amount female professionals, working class ‘Welsh women continued to live their lives within the confines of a narrow code of respectability and within the boundaries of their allotted sphere’.³⁰

Beddoe argued that the ‘back to home movement’³¹ dominated the lives of women during the inter-war years, and public sentiment presented a dichotomy of opinion, on the one hand, Munitionettes

²⁷ House of Commons Debate dated 2nd June 1919: Restoration of Pre-War Practices (No.3) Bill, available at: <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1919/jun/02/restoration-of-pre-war-practices-no-3> Accessed: 15 May 2024.

²⁸ UK Parliament (2024) *Representation of the People Act 1918*. Available at: <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/parliament-and-the-first-world-war/legislation-and-acts-of-war1/acts-of-war---representation-of-the-people-act-1918--/> (Accessed: 15 May 2024).

²⁹ UK Parliament (2024) *Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act*. Available at: <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/tradeindustry/industrycommunity/collections/sex-disqualification-removal-act/sex-disqualification-removal-act/> (Accessed: 15 May 2024).

³⁰ Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p.108.

³¹ Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p.74.

were hailed heroes whose contribution to the war was vital, however, the tide was turning and by December 1918 the Department of Demobilisation and Resettlement was calling for women to 'stay at home instead of working' and that it would be 'patriotic to do so and so leave the field open to those who have to work to earn a livelihood'.³² This prominent messaging further reinforced the Pre-War Practices Act's facilitation of a return to separate spheres.

However, legislation was not the only cause of shifts in gender roles during inter-war years. Women's services that had been established during WWI, such as the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) and the Women's Royal Air Force (WRAF), were disbanded, whilst munitions factories that had once been integral to the war effort, shut their doors to the thousands of female workers who were dismissed 'en masse'.³³ Wales had long been a patriarchal society, with a 'total integration of home and work' for the women of South Wales,³⁴ and for a time at least, it seemed that Welsh women were destined to be confined to the realm of domesticity.

As the inter-war years continued from the 1920s to the 1930s, Wales, like the rest of Britain, was engulfed by an economic depression that hit Wales, 'longer, harder, deeper, more intractable and more apparently hopeless than in any other part of Britain'.³⁵ The impact on the South Wales Coalfields was particularly devastating. Mari Williams described the period as 'a social hell'³⁶, and from the early 1920s, South Wales saw a tidal wave of economic instability devastate working-class communities. Between 1921 and 1936, there were 241 pit closures, and as the 1930s progressed, parts of South Wales saw over 80 per cent of insured male workers unemployed.³⁷ The tumultuous 1930s ushered in 'new and difficult challenges' in the coalfields of South Wales that necessitated 'a

³² South Wales Evening Post, *Demobilisation: A Handy Guide to Employers and Employed*, (21 Dec 1918), p. 6.

³³ Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p.75

³⁴ Dot Jones, 'Counting the Cost of Coal: Women's Lives in the Rhondda, 1881-1911', in *Our Mother's Land: Chapters in Welsh Women's History, 1830-1939*, ed. by Angela V. John (Cardiff, 2011), p.113.

³⁵ Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p.75.

³⁶ Mari A. Williams, 'In the Wars': Wales 1914-1915, in *the People of Wales*, ed. by Jones and Smith (Llandysul,2000), p.188.

³⁷ Ministry of Labour, Local Unemployment Index (London, 1931-9) in Mari. A Williams. *A Forgotten Army: Female Munitions Workers of South Wales*. p.11.

re-evaluation of the region's traditional dependence upon male labour'.³⁸ Williams suggests that the focus on the 'unemployed miner [was] an obstacle for historians [attempting] to address the experiences of the women [in] this 'unemployed society' '.³⁹ Thus, it is important to focus the lens on women's interwar experiences to gain a greater understanding of the devastating effects the economic depression had on the communities of South Wales.

Kenneth O. Morgan stated that, for the people living in the Valley's 'the quality of life cannot have been anything but meagre [and] and struggle for existence'.⁴⁰ Conditions were harsh and mass unemployment meant that for the people of South Wales, the 1920s- 1930s were defined by 'abject poverty and appalling deprivation [that formed] the bleakest period in the history of twentieth-century Wales'.⁴¹ Between 1923 and 1930 the number of insured⁴² women in South Wales increased by 13 per cent, compared to a decrease of 7 per cent for insured male workers.⁴³ Women in the coalfields experienced significant hardships, and, driven by necessity rather than patriotism, they were compelled into the workforce thus challenging traditional gender roles and identities. Employment opportunities for women were limited and predominantly confined to roles considered 'women's work.' Many young women from Wales migrated to England to undertake positions in domestic service. The government used Industrial Transference schemes to deal with the issue of excess labour, especially among miners. The Industrial Transference Board was set up by a directive from the Prime Minister on 6 Jan. 1928 to advise on the relocation of workers, which exacerbated the depopulation of Welsh towns and villages between 1928 and 1937.⁴⁴

³⁸ Williams, *A Forgotten Army*, pp. 11-12

³⁹ Williams, *A Forgotten Army*, p12

⁴⁰ Kenneth O. Morgan, *Wales: Rebirth of a Nation 1880-1980*, (Oxford:1981), p.230.

⁴¹ Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p.86.

⁴² The National Insurance Act 1911 introduced health insurance and unemployment benefits for workers in the United Kingdom, laying the foundation for the modern welfare state. (See: <https://navigator.health.org.uk/theme/national-insurance-act-1911>)

⁴³ Board of Trade, *An Industrial Survey of South Wales*. p18, in Mari. A. Williams, *A Forgotten Army: Female Munitions Worker of South Wales 1939-1945*, (Cardiff,2002) p.12.

⁴⁴ Industrial Transference Board Report (1928) ,(see: <https://parlipapers-proquest-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/parlipapers/docview/t70.d75.1928-029369?accountid=14697>)

Chris Williams, in juxtaposition to the 'myth of the Welsh Mam', argues that the 'coalfield society, then, was deeply fractured along the line of gender division', and was, 'predominantly, a patriarchal society in which women occupied a subordinate, [...] position'.⁴⁵ unemployed men in South Wales generally had complex and often conflicted feelings about their wives and daughters entering the workforce. While economic necessity forced many families to rely on women's incomes, this shift challenged traditional gender roles and male identity, leading to feelings of inadequacy, resentment, and concern over the erosion of male breadwinner status. There was also a pragmatic acceptance, as women's income was crucial for family survival during severe economic hardship.

The collapse of the coalfields led to mass unemployment that inevitably had a detrimental impact on the home life of working-class families. 'Housing in Wales, as in the rest of Britain [...] was characterized by shortages, appalling conditions and high rents'.⁴⁶ Beddoe argued the absence of essential facilities caused women to bear a heavy burden of work. Unemployment benefits were 'meagre' and the 'Means Test' essentially 'pauperised the unemployed'.⁴⁷ Mothers were forced to 'make ends meet' by any means possible and as a result, the health of women declined. Lack of a living wage meant many women went without. Food became a valuable resource, and some women resorted to scavenging to feed their families. As a result of male unemployment,

The whole burden of home management, the feeding and clothing of the children, the cheering of the despondent man, the careful checking out of Unemployment allowance – these are the major tasks of an unemployed home, and it is to the women they fall. No tribute to the women of South Wales can be too generous for the way in which they have shouldered this excessive burden of depression and not lost courage.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Chris Williams, *Capitalism, Community, and Conflict: The South Wales Coalfield: 1898-1947*. (Cardiff: 1998) p.69

⁴⁶ Beddoe, in *Our Mothers Land*, p.201.

⁴⁷ Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p.87.

⁴⁸ South Wales and Monmouthshire Council of Social Service, *3rd Annual Report 1936-1937: Life in South Wales Today* (Cardiff. 1937), p.22

Beddoe acknowledges that while the responses of Welsh women to the challenges of the interwar years may seem to perpetuate the stereotype of the 'Welsh Mam,' she contends that the reality is quite different and the 'mam [...] had little say in public affairs [and was] economically dependent on men' and ultimately, due to 'sketchy' information on birth control, lacked autonomy over her own body.⁴⁹

As the 1930s progressed towards WWII. Deakin argues that 'hindsight' following the slow response to the First World War, ensured that 'almost all measures needed for the waging of waging of total war were in place within five months of the start of the conflict'.⁵⁰ Hitler's 'Lebensraum policy' of expanding German territories.⁵¹, prompted the British Government to take proactive measures, recognising that another global conflict would require extensive human resources on the 'home front'. However, this time, unlike WWI, 'women figured in the government planning'.⁵² Several historians have argued that impending conflict was far from being a disaster for the people of Wales, rather, it was the catalyst to pull South Wales and its people out of economic despair. Williams states that 'it was the waging of war which brought the greatest transformation in female employment opportunities in South Wales',⁵³ although Beddoe argues that on the eve of WWII, women fostered a sense of despondency, WWI had failed to be the 'gateway to new opportunities'⁵⁴ they had hoped, thus, they 'knew better, [than to hold] such high hopes' as the world marched towards the Second World War.⁵⁵

In the 1930s, the British government embarked on a comprehensive strategy to increase its industrial capacity, focusing on establishing ordnance factories. Anticipating the need for massive production of munitions and military equipment, the government devised plans to construct new factories and

⁴⁹ Beddoe, in *Our Mothers Land*, p.207.

⁵⁰ Quentin Deakin, *Wales in World War 2*, (Ceredigion:2023), p.32.

⁵¹ For further information see: Jennifer Murtoff. (2023) 'Lebensraum', in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Available at: <https://www-britannica-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/topic/Lebensraum>. (Accessed 24 May 2024)

⁵² Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p.109.

⁵³ Williams, *A Forgotten Army*, p51.

⁵⁴ Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p.108.

⁵⁵ Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p.108.

expand existing ones. South Wales, with its rich industrial heritage and skilled workforce, many of whom were looking for paid employment, was a prime location for these efforts. The region established several Royal Ordnance Factories (ROFs), such as those in Bridgend and Glascoed, which became pivotal in producing ammunition, explosives, and other war materials. These factories were strategically placed to utilise local resources and labour. By the time WWII erupted, the groundwork had been laid to allow for a swift ramp-up in production.

Unemployment began to fall from 1936 onwards and in 1937 South Wales saw a fall of almost ten per cent, from 141,771 to 98,580 registered unemployed, although caution is required when analysing these figures because of the Industrial Transference Schemes in designated 'special areas' that saw young women migrate to England for jobs in domestic service or nursing. The South Wales and Monmouthshire Council of Social Service noted in 1937 that during the last fifteen years 'some 300,000 people have left the four counties of Brecon, Carmarthen, Glamorgan, and Monmouth'.⁵⁶ Thus, to some extent, it could also be attributable to men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four leaving Wales for work opportunities elsewhere.⁵⁷ However, when viewed cautiously, it is clear that the increase in employed men would have certainly impacted the living standards of their wives and families and provided much-needed relief in the wake of the hardships of the preceding decade. Manufacturing was ramped up and in March 1938, the government obtained powers to direct industry to produce goods that were essential for rearmament, opening further employment opportunities.

To meet with the impending rise in war manufacture, the British Government commissioned several surveys to ascertain areas of population from which they could draw workers, to fulfil the work of 'national importance'. In June 1940 the Factory and Welfare Department and Advisory Board, under the leadership of Ernest Bevin (Minister of Labour and National Service), was established to survey

⁵⁶ South Wales and Monmouthshire Council of Social Service, *3rd Annual Report 1936-1937: Life in South Wales Today* (Cardiff: 1937), p.7.

⁵⁷ D. Gareth Evans, *A History of Wales 1906-2000*, (Cardiff: 2000), p.31.

'the extent and nature of the available and potential supply of labour'.⁵⁸ Furthermore, in the Summer of 1940, the Manpower Survey was commissioned by Williams Beveridge (Chairman of the Manpower Requirements Committee of the Production Council) to ascertain the numbers of men and women available for work of *national importance*. The Manpower Survey of South Wales (led by J. Frederick Rees of University College Wales) identified considerable potential reserves of female labour⁵⁹.

⁵⁸ Williams, *A Forgotten Army*, pp.59-60.

⁵⁹ Margaret Gowing, *The Organisation of Manpower in Britain During the Second World War*, (

2: WAR AND THE DOMESTIC SPHERE

WW1 and the interwar years brought about significant changes to the lives of the people of South Wales. Chapter 1 of this dissertation focuses on how the women of South Wales responded to the hardships of the economic depression and looks at how the British government sought to enable the mobilisation of civilians to participate in War preparations on the eve of WW2. This chapter will examine the war years of 1939-1945 and examine in what ways WWII initiated a period of significant change, compelling women to adopt new roles and responsibilities that would fundamentally reshape their domestic and societal positions. This chapter examines the impact of WWII on the home lives of Welsh women, analysing how their daily existence was altered by the exigencies of a global conflict by examining contemporary newspaper articles, oral histories, and official records, as well as the historiography surrounding the women of Wales and their wartime experience, concluding that although the changes in the work and domestic spheres were not insignificant, once again, the gender divide underpinned society in Wartime South Wales.

During the interwar years, despite the adversities of the depression and the collapse of the mining industries that had compelled some women to enter the workplace,⁶⁰ the lives of many Welsh women remained largely confined to the domestic sphere, characterised by household management, child-rearing, and supporting their husbands. However, the advent of war necessitated a rapid and significant re-assessment of these traditional roles in what Beddoe describes as 'the largest challenge to the traditional Welsh way of life'.⁶¹ The National Services (Armed Forces) Act (1939), came into effect at the outbreak of WWII and mandated that men between eighteen and forty-one years of age were conscripted into military service.⁶² Thus, the British Government identified the need to recruit

⁶⁰ Discussed in chapter one, p.

⁶¹ Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p.110.

⁶² UK Parliament, *National Services (Armed Forces) Act (1939)*, Available at : <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/yourcountry/collections/collections-second-world-war/second-world-war-legislation/national-service-armed-forces-act-c81-1939/>

workers into *necessary* war work, and the Manpower Survey (1940), commissioned by Beveridge, and carried out by J Frederick for South Wales, identified women as a valuable resource to be utilised during the coming conflict. The government's mobilization efforts extended beyond the military to the civilian sector, encouraging women that their participation was crucial to the war effort.

Propaganda campaigns were used to entice women to participate in the war effort, posters such as the 'Women of Britain come into the factories' were commissioned to place pressure on women to enter the workforce and Williams argues that 'propaganda became a powerful tool in the campaign to recruit their [women] services at war factories'.⁶³ The Ministry of Information broadcast over radio such as the emotive "Keep the Home Fires Burning' (1939)'. However, Williams cautions that it is 'impossible to measure' the impact that such propaganda had on the women of South Wales, as the women had already been entering the workplace before the official direction to do so. It is also worth noting that although the older generation of Welsh women, with raw memories of WWI, may have had anti-German sentiment reignited, the younger generation, following the hardships of the interwar years may have been motivated more by economic and social reasons, than out of a sense of patriotism. Thomas Jones (South Wales and Monmouthshire Divisional Food officer) was quoted as saying 'The waging of war has filled the valleys with work and wages.'⁶⁴

Reinforcing Beddoe's argument that the War presented significant challenges to the traditional Welsh family, ⁶⁵Johnes argues that 'It was the movement of women and children that was to have the most impact and cause the most controversy in Wales'.⁶⁶ The argument that women's war work was a contentious issue, is reinforced by Roberts in *The Budgie Train*,⁶⁷ who quotes observations made by an

⁶³ Williams, *A Forgotten Army*, p.61

⁶⁴ Quoted in Williams, *A forgotten Army*, p.62.

⁶⁵ UK Parliament, *Maximum National Effort Volume 376*: debated on Thursday 4 December 1941(HC) Available at: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1941-12-04/debates/7a7cce0b-ecb4-4a17-beae-2cc7d801fe38/MaximumNationalEffort?highlight=manpower%20survey#contribution-5831c170-bd49-4d22-a465-24fb20b8a76b>

⁶⁶ Martin Johnes, *Wales Since 1939*, (Manchester: 2014), p.13.

⁶⁷ Roberts, *The Budgie Train*, p.146

unnamed labour exchange official who perceived 'One big factor against women going out to work, has been reluctance to leave the district [...] "Mother doesn't want me to go so far away,"⁶⁸ furthermore, they observed that 'Often their husbands didn't want them to go [...]"No, she's not. She's not going! Let bloody Mrs. Churchill go and make munitions! '⁶⁹ It could be argued that during the early years of WWII, women were still constrained by the expectations within both their domestic sphere and within the wider society, with women's movement into essential work leaving men, in what were hitherto patriarchal coalfields, feeling resentful and emasculated. As the war marched on, some men still harboured such feelings. An article from *The Western Mail*, (March 1943) reports an unemployed miner⁷⁰ resentfully stated ' I am one of the 'unemployables' but I reckon [...] I could do some of these jobs the women are doing' whilst reporting that 'The paradox of men still being unable to get work while increasing pressure is brought on women to enter industry has been a subject for comment in the Welsh Valleys for some time'⁷¹ thus providing further evidence at the extent of unease amongst the men of the Valleys that persisted to a certain degree, throughout the War years. However, further direct action would be required to fill the shortfall in war-time workers and March 1941 saw the introduction of the Registration for Employment Order that mandated women between the ages of 18 and 45 years old to register at their local employment exchanges and were placed on the National Work register⁷²

However, regardless of men's sentiments on the issue of female participation, as the War progressed, legislation was introduced to mandate the participation of females in war work, and the numbers of women involved in industrial labour started to rise with the passing of the National Service Act (no.2) 1941, which compelled unmarried women between the ages of 20 and 30 years of age, to be placed

⁶⁸ Roberts, *The Budgie Train*, p.146.

⁶⁹ Roberts, *The Budgie Train*, p.146.

⁷⁰ Unemployed miners were often men who were inflicted with industrial diseases such as silicosis, and therefore were 'ex-miners' or referred to as 'compo men'.

⁷¹ Anon, Compo Miners Will Work in the Factories, *Western Mail*, 18 March 1943. Available at: <https://www.newspapers.com/article/western-mail-unemployables/148249119/>

⁷² UK Parliament, *HC Deb 20 March 1941 vol 370 cc315-400*, Available at: <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1941/mar/20/woman-power>.

in necessary war work.⁷³ In Wales, this mobilization saw women entering roles previously deemed unsuitable for their gender. Factories that had once produced consumer goods were converted to munitions production, where Welsh women worked extended hours under hazardous conditions. Testimony from women who worked in the factories highlights the dangerous nature of factory work for women. Sylva Poppy Griffiths remembered her time doing essential war work at a Flax production factory producing flax. She recalled several accidents, some of which were serious, such as a worker 'losing an eye' and another having 'part of her arm ripped out'. However, despite the dangers she remembered her time in the factory fondly; 'It was an interesting job and you knew that it was helping the war effort'.⁷⁴ Not only was the work hazardous but the hours were long. Mair Davies recalls having to leave at 5.10 a.m. to make it to work at 7 a.m.⁷⁵

Propaganda created by the Ministry of Information targeted women, urging them to join the war effort and advertising campaigns were carried out in local and national newspapers. One such advertisement printed in the Glamorgan Advertiser (July 1941)⁷⁶ used language such as 'Let's Show 'em' and 'your duty now is war work' to emphasise the importance the Ministry of Labour placed on the female workforce, reiterating that they 'now have a grand opportunity to play their part'.

⁷⁷However, the poster continues to place women firmly in the bounds of the stereotypical 'mam', with laundered nappies on the washing line, wearing the housewives' uniform of a pinny and headscarf, the imagery suggesting that despite their obligation to take part in the war effort, the women of Wales were still expected to fulfil their duties as housewives and mothers. Thus, Beddoe argues that the 'wartime employment of thousands of Welsh Wives and mothers was interpreted as a temporary aberration, and pre-war notions regarding the 'proper' role of women in the domestic sphere

⁷³ The Act was later extended to include married (without young children) women. See:

<https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/yourcountry/collections/collections-second-world-war/second-world-war-legislation/national-service-act-c15-1941-/>

⁷⁴ Interview with Poppy Griffiths, Voices from the Factory Floor, Available at [Sylva Poppy Griffiths \(known as Poppy\). Voices from the Factory Floor | Peoples Collection Wales](#)

⁷⁵ Mair Davies, The Royal Ordnance Factory, Bridgend, in *Petticoats and Parachutes, Welsh Women Writing on the Second World War*

⁷⁶ Ministry of Information, *Let's show 'em what South Wales can do*, in Glamorgan Advertiser, 11 July 1941,

⁷⁷ See Appendix, Fig.1.

remained intact'.⁷⁸ This balancing act is further emphasised by Roberts who argues that 'traditional definitions of female roles remained strong [...] as the war progressed [...] women were increasingly expected to undertake war work while still having to be responsible for running their homes.'⁷⁹ Thus it could be argued that women in South Wales shouldered a considerable amount of burden in comparison to the men in essential work who were not expected to fulfil domestic duties in addition to their paid employment.

Within the domestic sphere, it was not only the matter of employment that women had to contend with. Braybon and Summerfield stated that 'Women's accounts of how they coped with the double burden between 1939 and 1945 echo those of the inter-war years'.⁸⁰ The consequences of government policies and restrictions provided 'an extra load for already burdened women'.⁸¹ The implementation of rationing policies necessitated substantial adaptations in household management. However, the wartime food supply limitations were a double-edged sword, in a way rationing levelled the playing field to an extent, price fixing made food more affordable to the working classes, and the points system ensured everyone was entitled to their fair share. People living in rural South Wales would have been in a better position to grow vegetables and raise livestock. That said, the available food allowed for a diet that was considerably healthier than during the interwar years. Beddoe suggested that although 'women bore the brunt of wartime shortages [...] their experience of poverty, brought to this challenge a wealth of experience in making a little go a long way'.⁸² Thus reinforcing the Braybon and Summerfields argument of the double burden. Newspaper articles were aimed at women, The Glamorgan Gazette (Fri 11 July 1941) advertised cookery demonstrations in Bridgend, presented by a Ministry of Food adviser. Prominently emphasising in big bold lettering, the word

⁷⁸ Williams, *A Forgotten Army*, p.156. See appendix, Fig.2. also available at: <https://www.newspapers.com/article/the-glamorgan-advertiser-and-weekly-news/148238459/>

⁷⁹ Brian Roberts, 'The 'Budgie Train': Women and Wartime Munition Work in a Mining Valley', *Llafur the Journal of the Study of Welsh Labour History*, Vol.7. No 3-7, (1998-9) p.p. 144-152, Available at: <https://journals.library.wales/view/1326508/1329235#?m=26>

⁸⁰ Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield, *Out of the Cage Women's Experiences in Two World Wars*, London: 1987, p.209

⁸¹ Ibid, p.209

⁸² Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p.127.

'HOUSEWIVES!', which left no room for doubt that women were responsible for feeding their families.⁸³

In 1941 clothing rationing was introduced and the government produced Welsh women who exhibited remarkable resourcefulness in coping with limited supplies, employing innovative approaches to cooking and homemaking. The Ministry of Information continued with its propaganda campaigns such as the 'Mrs Sew and Sew'⁸⁴ which were intended to educate women in resourcefulness, however, 'there was little that was new for many Welsh women to learn [...] they had been doing that for generations.'⁸⁵ Mothers would take old dresses to make new garments such as pillowcases and aprons. The interwar years had ensured that women were well equipped to 'Make do and Mend'. It could be argued that the tone of such propaganda appeared to patronise women and was rather akin to teaching grandmother to suck eggs.⁸⁶

Despite the terrible deprivation experienced during the interwar years, women developed strategies during the 1920s and 1930s that equipped them with the necessary stamina to cope with the hardships of the conflict. During times of immense hardship, their strength and stoicism allowed them to carry on in the face of adversity. The lack of basic amenities during the Depression better equipped them to cope with shortages during WW2. However, the reality is likely to be far more nuanced, and despite outward appearances, many women would have been suffering from significant psychological effects of loss and hardship. The people of Wales felt that their nation was a haven from the horrors of battle, thus, the first few months of WW2 became known as a 'phoney war'.⁸⁷ Wales was used as a receiving area for thousands of evacuees from England, further adding to women's workload. However, that was to change when the Luftwaffe began to target cities in South Wales. Swansea

⁸³ The Glamorgan Gazette, *Food Advice Bureau*, 11 July 1941.

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⁸⁵ Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p.128.

⁸⁶ Teaching (your) grandmother to suck eggs is an English language saying that refers to a person advising another person in a subject with which the other person is already familiar (and probably more so than the first person) – see [Teaching grandmother to suck eggs- Wikipedia](#) for further origins.

⁸⁷ Further information on the 'phoney war' can be found at: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/britains-phoney-start-to-the-second-world-war>

suffered a devastating assault for three nights between 19 February and 21 February 1941, killing 230 people (a total of 369 people were killed between 1940 and 1943, the result of forty-four German air raids). The South Wales Evening Post reported 'Injured Women and Children among Swansea's heroes'⁸⁸ and quotes an unnamed doctor praising the 'most amazing courage [of] the men, women and children'.⁸⁹ The women and children of South Wales were no longer passive bystanders of the War but were firmly on the front line.

Women were also contributed to the aid response. Established in 1938, the Women's Voluntary Service (W.V.S) mobilised women into the war effort by providing support in the community. They were a crucial part of the evacuation program in 1939 and were on hand to assist the stricken people of Swansea with cups of tea and a warm place to stay, people united in a sense of shock and grief. The *Western Mail* reported that the Minister of Health, Ernest Brown, visited Swansea following the blitz and remarked at the 'extraordinarily fine cooperation everywhere [...] the gallantry of the men and of the hospital nurses were beyond praise. I must praise too, the fine work of the W.V.S'.⁹⁰ However, this painted a somewhat 'rosy' picture of the steadfastness of the people affected by the bombardment and the aftermath told a different story. Beddoe states that in the midst of what Welsh nationalists saw as the 'neglect of the English government [...] most people voted with their feet'.⁹¹ Despite government propaganda that maintained the people in the towns devastated by the raids were 'keeping a stiff upper lip' and carrying on regardless, in reality, they were depopulating the towns at night, for the safety of places such as Gower.⁹² An underlying sense of loss and bewilderment, coupled with the persistent threat of air raids, engendered a pervasive atmosphere of anxiety and uncertainty. Women were compelled to assume the role of protector within their households, offering reassurance and stability to their families and communities despite such devastation.

⁸⁸ South Wales Evening Post, *Injured Women and Children Among Swansea's Heroes*, Mon 24th Feb 1941, p.1.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p.1

⁹⁰ The Western Mail, *Minister of Health Sees Swansea's Scars*, 12 Mar 1941.

⁹¹ Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p.126

⁹² Ibid, p.126

Women organized and participated in local civil defence working as Air Raid Wardens. These activities fostered a spirit of camaraderie and mutual support, mitigating the isolation and stress engendered by wartime conditions. The establishment of the Women's Land Army, re-formed on 1 June 1939 by the War Agricultural Committee,⁹³ saw women recruited to maintain agricultural production, thus ensuring the continuity of food supplies despite the depletion of the male workforce. These roles required not only physical endurance and resilience but also conferred upon women a newfound sense of autonomy and proficiency. For many young women, this was the first time they had experience beyond the confines of their domestic space, and it was a hard existence. Betty Davies remembered 'it was a different life altogether [...] They were happy days but, looking back, I'd never go back'.⁹⁴

In conclusion, World War II acted as a catalyst for profound social change among Welsh women. It dismantled entrenched gender roles and demonstrated women's capacity to manage both domestic and broader economic responsibilities during a period of national crisis. The wartime experiences and skills acquired by Welsh women had enduring effects, empowering them to seek greater autonomy and participation in post-war society. However, these changes were not instantaneous, and it took many years for the feminist movement to establish itself in South Wales.

⁹³ Phil Carradice, *Wales at War*, Llandysul:2003, p84.

⁹⁴ Betty Davies, in *Wales at War*, Llandysul:2003, p.88

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the impact of World War II on the women of Wales was significant. The war necessitated significant adaptations in domestic life, workforce participation, and social engagement, leading to a redefinition of women's roles and contributions. However, the war did not lead to complete emancipation from their domestic duties and historians such as Beddoe and Williams argued that rather than breaking down the walls of separate Spheres, the ideology of women belonging within the domestic sphere persevered.⁹⁵ Rather than freeing women of their domestic chains, women were expected to shoulder a significant burden within both the domestic and public spheres.

This dissertation has examined to what extent the interwar years and World War Two reshaped the roles of Welsh women within the family, workforce, and wider communities. Both challenges and opportunities marked this period of intense hardship and transformation, as Welsh women navigated the complexities of wartime exigencies and contributed significantly to the national effort. The war catalysed a redefinition of gender roles for the duration of the conflict. However, as Higonet et.al suggested, women remained in a subordinate position to men. The war presented a state of continuity between the sexes rather than significant, lasting change.

Women were still expected to carry out household duties, whilst balancing the needs of their families. Welsh Women continued to shoulder a 'double burden'.⁹⁶

Although this dissertation has not explored the wider consequences for women's liberation in the years that followed World War Two, in the immediate years following the end of the conflict, World War Two did not present women with the immediate emancipation they had hoped for. However, it could be argued that Welsh women's experiences during the inter-war years and into World War Two

⁹⁵ Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p.108

⁹⁶ Braybon & Summerfield, *Out of the Cage*, p.209

meant that they came out the other side having tasted a sense of freedom like never before and thus laid the groundwork for subsequent social changes in the post-war era.

Welsh women faced difficulties and overcame them with courage and resolve. The interwar years had taught them how to cope with the challenges of the war years. One of the noticeable effects of the war was the rationing, which changed daily life for Welsh women significantly. Historians like Beddoe have pointed out that Welsh women learned how to manage with limited supplies, often using local exchange systems and creative cooking methods to feed their families. Ministry of Information propaganda promoted the image of the Welsh Mams' ingenuity and resilience. Oral histories, such as Eira John's, provide personal stories that highlight both the struggles and the community spirit experienced during this period.

The war significantly impacted women's involvement in the labour market. Women gained access to new jobs as men were drafted and war-related industries needed more workers. In Wales, this was especially evident in sectors such as munitions, agriculture, and civil defence. These sectors were traditionally dominated by men, and women's entry into them not only addressed critical labour gaps but also questioned existing gender norms. Women's roles in the war effort in these areas were essential, but some men did not approve of their wives and daughters working. It is clear that women did not always engage in vital war work out of patriotic duty, but out of necessity, the pay, and new freedoms that they enjoyed, giving them a sense of liberation from the previous gender norms imposed on them.

The war also influenced women's social and civic involvement. Government messages and programs urged women to join various volunteer activities, such as the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) and the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS). These organizations gave women a sense of meaning and fellowship, as well as chances to learn new skills and take part in community-building activities, granting women more agency. However, as Beddoe admits, there is still a lot to be written on the Welsh Women during World War Two.

Thus, the years between and during the world wars gave women some opportunities for liberation, as they gained new incomes, social networks, and rights. However, these new roles were not welcomed by all, and some men resented women for stepping out of the household. By the time World War Two ended, women were still largely restricted to the domestic sphere.

6977 words

APPENDIX

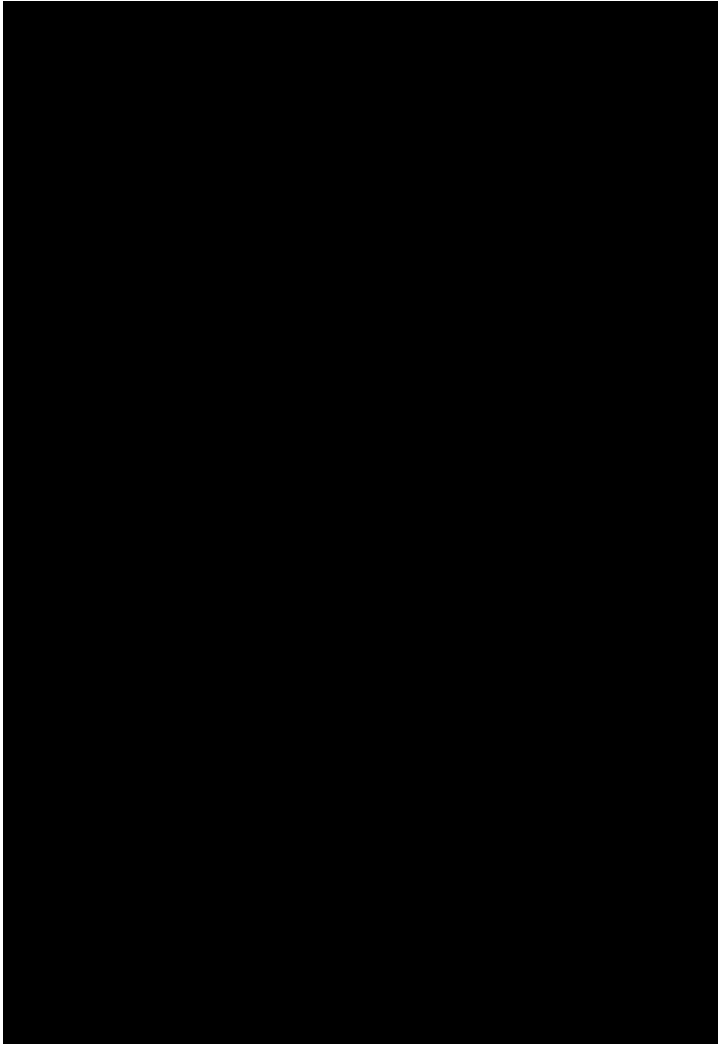


IMAGE REDACTED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS

Fig.1. Ministry of Information, *Let's show 'em what South Wales can do*, in Glamorgan Advertiser, 11 July 1941,



Fig.2 .Make Do and Mend-The Board of Trade, Date Unknown, Available at [Make-Do and Mend Says Mrs Sew-and-Sew | Imperial War Museums \(iwm.org.uk\)](https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/60400)

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