Uncovering hidden stories of women and the First



To mark International Women's Day, Maggie Andrews, Professor of Cultural History at the University of Worcester, reflects on how Lottery funding is helping to uncover some of the lesser known stories of women in the First World War.

In the summer of 1915 women marched through London with the suffragette leader Emmeline Pankhurst, demanding the right to work for the war effort. In the months that followed, women increasingly worked in munitions, nursing, offices, on trams or joined the Land Army. And it is these women's experiences that have produced many of the iconic images of women's involvement in the First World War.

The history of the majority of women who were housewives and mothers, making a more domestic contribution to the war effort, is however often forgotten. These women knitted, sewed, and raised funds for soldiers and prisoners of war. Some took in refugees from Belgium, others had soldiers billeted on them, or shared their homes with relations escaping the threat of Zeppelin raids in the towns and cities. Other examples include:

- Wives and mothers went on caring for sons and husbands who had joined the army. One East End woman got herself badly into debt ensuring her husband went to training camp with new underwear.
- Women wrote regularly to their loved ones in the forces; often accompanying letters with parcels of food and clothing. Cakes, puddings and cherries were very welcome, strawberries did not travel well and soldiers reported that bread had sometimes been nibbled by rats before arrival at the front.

- One exciting output of recent HLF-funded projects is a greater understanding of women's different local war experiences including Bristol women who worked in the Mustard Gas factories and Women Footballers of Coventry.
- The Leominster Area Regeneration Company's HLF-funded First World War project is exploring the challenges of food scarcity as war progressed. In 1917 Worcester women queued six hours for a tub of margarine. This was all whilst domestic guru Mrs Peel encouraged women to make jam replacing sugar with salt, claiming the salty taste diminished after a few months.
- Worcestershire's HLF-funded projects are shedding light on the challenges faced by rural women contributing both to feeding their families and local agriculture. One anxious soldier wrote to his wife in 1915, "So sorry to think of you salting the pig without me. Do be careful not to slip on the cellar steps". Killing and preserving the family pig were important tasks in rural households but difficult for women on their own.

The First World War Centenary is an opportunity to tease out more of the hidden histories of women's everyday lives, their heroism and endurance during the conflict. Local newspapers, letters, diaries and photographs in people's draws or attics, memories, records of women's organisations and school log books tell of rabbit and pig clubs, children taken out of school to take their mum's place in food queues and help us explore women's history from new angles.

One of the aims of the Voices of War and Peace: the Great War and its Legacy Centre, based at Birmingham University, is to support local community groups, museums, archives, and organisations interested in women's history. This support is provided through advice, guidance, community events, and conferences; some of which have been held in conjunction with the Women's History Network.

If you want to develop a project looking at women's history during the First World War, visit HLF's Understanding the First World War feature, where you can find out more about HLF's funding and how to access support from the First World War Engagement Centres.