

The Role of Women

The most noticeable thing about women in the First World War was that they did not hit the headlines. A YMCA opened for business in Rhuddlan in 1915, “soldiers from Kinmel Park and the munitions workers at the Foundry have expressed their gratitude for this provision, which has been made for their comfort.” It is recorded that it was “under the superintendence of Mr Clarke and a number of ladies”.

As the need for more troops grew, women were targeted by newspaper articles and posters to encourage their husbands, friends and sons to enlist. “We can encourage our own relations and friends to enlist in our Army and Navy, and not make it difficult for them by lamentations and regrets” wrote Georgina Pennant in the Flintshire Observer. Weekly financial allowances for the wives and dependents of serving soldiers were published to try to reassure families that they would not suffer undue hardship while the main breadwinner was away on military duty, and at the same time women were encouraged to invest their savings in War Loans to aid funding of the war.



In the years before the war many women had been campaigning to get the vote and were expressing their political views more publicly. “The Hon. Mary Hughes on Monday night entertained about 200 members of the Rhyl branch of the Women’s Unionist and Tariff Reform Association to their annual social and in her address as president urged that it was the duty of the leisured class to study politics, as the ship of State was in a very bad way. Women could do a great deal, and she appealed to them to work. Mrs. Boyce, from the Central Office, said women should endeavour to instruct the uneducated men in politics, as it was the uneducated who became the prey of the first agitator who came along.” The Association had twenty three branches in the county, total membership 2786, with Rhyl the third strongest at 239. In 1914, on her wedding, Miss Mary Parry, daughter of Colonel and Mrs. Parry of Plas Pengwern, “received a silver salver from the Rhuddlan Women’s Unionist Association, with which she had for many years been an active member. Her mother is the president of the association.” The salver was presented by Miss Lacey of Banquet House and Miss Enyon of Hylas.

Teaching even before the war had been a respectable occupation for a woman. The Headmaster’s Log Book for Rhuddlan Schools reveals many of the teachers were women who gave long and loyal service. Traditionally they left the school on marriage but the war changed that and several returned to teach, although the Denbighshire Free Press records that in December 1916 Miss Alice Davies, of Leith

House, teacher at the National School, left after nine years to marry.

Newspapers reported wives taking over as licensees of local inns from their husbands “who had gone up on service”. “The licence of the Mariners’ Arms, Rhuddlan, was transferred from Samuel Crowther to his wife.” Just before the war Bennett’s Business Directory lists only three business women in Rhuddlan: Mrs T Evans the postmistress, Miss Williams a newsagent and Mrs Evans proprietor of a tearoom on the High Street, while the 1911 census records women working as servants, doing laundry, sewing, dairy work and one as an “assistant to husband”.

Women took up many extra roles during the wartime period. The Lord Lieutenant, Mr Henry Neville Gladstone, was required in 1915 to draw up a list of all women to work in munitions, nursing and on the land. Dairy and poultry work was almost entirely in women’s hands. The Women’s Land Army played a major role in cattle and horse work, harvesting and potato lifting, and in 1917 organised a North Wales Efficiency Test Meeting at Llewellyd Farm on the Rhuddlan to Meliden road, by kind permission of Mr Snelson, to include “milking, horse ploughing, tractor ploughing, waggoner’s test (harnessing, yoking and driving a single horse in 4-wheeled wagon), thatching, hedge trimming, trenching and digging, pruning of fruit trees”. Competitors came from across North Wales and the event was recorded in the Manchester Guardian. It was advertised that “women labourers were available for farm work - weeding corn, singling turnips and mangolds. At 5d per hour for experienced workers and 4½d per hour for inexperienced, farmers were urged to “give them a trial”. The Lord Lieutenant emphasised the importance of utilising the services of women whenever possible in farming work and many stayed on after the war, marrying farmers who appreciated their many skills.

Rhuddlan Foundry turned to munitions production, making shell casings around the clock. Women again stepped up and took on the role of foundry workers. Nationally, women were widely employed in dangerous munitions work and a booklet on Employment of Women was issued by the Ministry of Munitions in February 1916.



Francis Corbett with female munitions workers, 1916

As the war dragged on and the toll of injury and loss became obvious, women suffered anxiety for their families and their futures. In 1917 the recently widowed Mrs Vaughan appears in the press after the loss of her son. This letter published in the Denbighshire Free Press illustrates the suffering of mothers, sisters and wives across Britain who lost or lived in fear of losing their loved ones:-

“Dear Mrs Vaughan, I have just seen..... the announcement of the death of your son, Dr R W Vaughan. We are ... grieved to learn that he has been killed in action and would offer to you our sincere sympathy. It is indeed a noble end of a noble life.”

Fundraising was largely a role for women and it is noticeable that in the press women's names were used more extensively in this context. Mrs Parry of Pengwern became Rhuddlan organiser for the Flintshire Voluntary Aid Organisation to help Sick and Wounded Servicemen. The Denbighshire Infirmary was supported by Rhuddlan collections and in 1914 Miss I W Jones is recorded as having collected £2 10s 5d assisted by Miss Massey, Miss E M Edwards and Miss Olwen Parry. A social held at the Reading and Recreation Room in December 1915 by Mrs Maxwell raised £12 for the Rhuddlan Working Party for Soldiers' Comforts. Many “Flag Days” involving selling paper lapel flags were undertaken by women in aid of Russian, Belgian and French victims of war, as well as British servicemen and in October 1914 an appeal was made for women to approach people they saw smoking in the street to ask them to donate a cigarette for the Soldiers Fund, to be placed in a tin box which they carried. Every organisation had a sewing and knitting circle and between 1914 and 1918 the Dyserth Field Club ladies sent over 1650 items such as shirts, mufflers, gloves, socks and hats to men at the Front.

Despite, or perhaps because of hard times people still enjoyed the Arts. A piano teacher, Cecilia Anwyl, advertised that she would travel weekly from Wallasey to give piano lessons. Rhuddlan's Band of Hope held a tea and impromptu entertainment at the Upper School “which gave much merriment and satisfaction” and the event ended with the singing “with great heartiness of the Russian, French and English national anthems”. Maggie Smith, Vera Thompson, Kate Pritchard, Lena Jones, Blanche Jones and Myfanwy Jones were listed among those taking part. The famous singer Madame Clara Butt came to perform at Rhyl Pavilion on Whit Monday, May 20th 1918 and to make return travel easier to Rhuddlan an after concert motor was laid on.

After the war it is noticeable that, despite the extra roles taken during the conflict, there was little increase in women listed in the local trade directory. The postmistress was still Mrs T Evans and Mrs Roberts was a grocer in Castle Street. The other listed women, Miss Britland, Mrs Jones and Miss Williams, were working as confectioners or providing refreshments in tearooms.

It is evident that the women in the Rhuddlan area took active roles during the war as well as the historical role of supporting the men in theirs. Although some women were given the vote in 1918 young women who had worked in munitions and in farming during the war found they were unable to vote still unless they were 30 years old and married to a voter or were a property owner or a graduate voting in a University constituency. It was not until 1928 that women over 21 years of age received the vote. Women's rights and socially acceptable roles and professions would alter after the war but the changes were to happen slowly.