



THE STORY OF THE WVS HOUSEWIVES' SERVICE

ROYAL VOLUNTARY SERVICE HERITAGE COLLECTION

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The story of the WVS Housewives Service

Commencement of the W.V.S. Housewives' Service. 1938.

Towards the close of 1938, the then Centre Leader of the W.V.S. Ilford Centre realised that, in those early days, whilst there were plenty of training classes for those volunteering for specific Air Raid Precaution duties, little provision was made for the ordinary housewife, who had too many duties to fulfil to be able to promise her time for many hours consecutively, and that such women, if partially trained, might assist the A.R.P. Services and help to promote morale in the event of air raids taking place.

Training in First Aid and Anti-Gas was accordingly organised for housewives in Ilford on those lines, and although the actual title of "Housewives Service" did not originate there, it may be said that the activities of the Ilford Centre led directly to the formation of this section of W.V.S.

In December 1938 the Barnes W.V.S. Centre inaugurated a "Housewives' Service" at the direct request of the A.R.P. Officer. It must be admitted that his idea was mainly put forward with the object of keeping W.V.S. "out of mischief", and he probably never envisaged a time when the Barnes Housewives' Service would be an integral part of the Borough Civil Defence Scheme.

Training for the Barnes Housewives was arranged in cooperation with the (then) Technical Department at W.V.S. Headquarters and consisted of lectures in First Aid, general Air Raid Precautions, Home Nursing and bandaging practices. The Boroughs of Kingston and Richmond followed the Barnes lead, and a similar service was inaugurated in the Metropolitan Borough of Stoke Newington.

1939

A Meeting of Surrey representatives was held on 6th July 1939 when the Barnes scheme was outlined by the Centre Organiser. An extract from the Minutes of that Meeting read as follows:

"An unofficial scheme which had been found useful was described as a service for "housewives". The object was to equip housewives in every street with knowledge of First Aid to help Wardens with casualties in an emergency. The training suggested was:-

6 First Aid Lectures.

4 Home Nursing Lectures

4 A.R.P. Lectures (The recognised Home Office short course.)

Bandaging practices.

This organisation would run parallel to the Wardens' Service."

It was about this time that similar services, only under different names (Wardens' Auxiliary Service, Good Neighbours, etc.) originated in Northampton, York and some other areas in the Regions. All were 'W.V.S. products.

As a part of the duties of the York Service, Trench Marshals were especially trained for duty in the event of Air Raids and much thought was given to a type of training which would lead to prevention and control of panic. It was not very long after the July Surrey Meeting in 1959 that almost all the Surrey Centres had organised branches of the W.V.S. Housewives' Service, similar to that originated by Barnes, and an increase in such branches followed in the whole of Greater London.

At this time the scheme was purely an unofficial one and could only be started in Local Authority areas where the officials welcomed it.

It was in July 1939 that the W.V.S. Housewives' Service Department at Headquarters gradually came into being as a section of the (then) Technical Department, and this came about as a necessity owing to the demand from W.V.S. Centres for guidance in the matter.

The first literature was sent out in the form of notes at the end of July 1959* introducing this activity of W.V.S., detailing the manner in which such a scheme could be organised and administered, suggesting the type of training, both initial and more advanced, and generally covering other points upon which guidance had been asked for.

At this time, a number of Local Authorities thought so highly of this branch of W.V.S. that they provided cards, denoting membership of the Service, to be placed in windows, and in some cases also gave armlets to Members, but from the beginning it was laid down that cards and armlets should only be given to members who had completed the local form of training. At the end of 1939 there were approximately 90,000 women enrolled in this section of W.V.S.

1940

In July 1940 a complete series of literature was issued from 'W.V.S. Headquarters.

1. Leaflet suitable for Local Authorities and "potential" members.
2. A Memorandum suitable for Centre Organisers, Local Authorities, Chief Wardens and A.R.P. Officers.
3. Notes for guidance in organising a branch of the service.

Early in this year the Ministry of Home Security recognised the W.V.S. Housewives' Service officially by authorising a standard window card for display in windows of members who were enrolled.

The issue of this card was an Important step forward, as it meant not only standardisation but nationalisation.

During this year a number of broadcasts on Air Raid Precautions and Elementary First Aid were given especially for "Housewives" by the (then) Technical Adviser to W.V.S., and at the request of the B.B.C. a little booklet, "Hints on Household A.R.P." was compiled from the material used in the Broadcasts. In this booklet the W.V.S. Housewives' Service was especially mentioned.

On 10th July 1940, in the "Calling All Women" series of broadcasts, the Technical Adviser to W.V.S, gave a broadcast on the W.V.S, Housewives' Service, calling for branches of this service in every road and street in the country.

A little later on a further booklet "The Care of Children in War-Time" was also issued by the B.B.C. written for "Housewives" and referring to the Service. The issue of this booklet synchronised with the beginning of the Battle of Britain, and the first particularly heavy air raids. This was the "testing" time, not only of W.V.S, as a whole, but also of their Housewives' Service and splendidly it stood up to its responsibilities.

The types of service and jobs called for were many and various during this time:-

Preparing for fire-fighting by placing containers of water and sand, shovels and rakes, where they would be in evidence if required.

Housing the temporarily homeless.

Provision of hot drinks for A.R.P, workers during action.

Feeding and providing hot drinks for people in shelters.

Wardens in some districts said that members of the Service had carried out a superb job in clearing the streets of children and getting them to shelter.

In some places members of the Service took over the telephones in Wardens' Posts whilst the Wardens were fully engaged in incident work.

Clubs were started in Air Raid Shelters and provision made for children.

Wardens used members of the Housewives' Service to warn householders in areas where there was danger from flooding and coal gas. In two cases, the women were working up to their knees in water.

In many cases washing facilities were provided for those people whose homes had suffered, and who were covered with soot and dirt.

Shock treatment was given in hundreds of cases to casualties awaiting the arrival of ambulances.

Searches for next-of-kin were carried out.

Cooking facilities were shared with those who had lost their own means of providing hot food, and numbers of other jobs were tackled too numerous to mention.

Many official tributes were paid to the work done and the example set by these women, who, though tied to their own homes, had given signal examples of service, and reports showed that the window cards denoting membership of the service had a steadying influence and a marked effect in some areas.

Members of the Service also took an active part in post-blitz arrangements. They prepared new homes for those bombed out of their own, washing, scrubbing and putting up "black-outs"; welcomed these unfortunates to the new neighbourhood; helped them with information as to shopping, etc.; "adopted" these evacuee families and ran social evenings for their benefit; and generally played the part of good neighbours.

In the majority of the branches of the W.V.S. Housewives' Service, members arranged to care for invalids, old people and mothers with young children whilst raids were in progress. In Bournemouth 52 Group Clearing Posts were opened by Wardens and manned and supplied with blankets and comforts by members of the Housewives' Service. These Posts were opened by Wardens after an "incident" and homeless taken from there to Rest Centres or 48-hour billets.

In one area the allocation of Air Raid Shelter tickets was arranged through Housewives, and numbers of them became Shelter Marshals.

The W.V.S. Housewives' Service had its casualties - a heavy list - and its Roll of Honour.

One member was killed whilst caring for a bedridden woman and her dumb daughter - her job as a W.V.S. Housewife.

One was killed carrying the little emergency First Aid case which she had got together with such care.

In another case the mother, a Member of the Service, was killed, and her daughter came the next-day to join the Service in her place and so have the right to wear her badge.

There were endless unreported cases of gallantry and numbers of unknown heroines - all members of this section of W.V.S. The work was a rare opportunity for the older women who would otherwise have felt frustrated and a little bitter in that they/were not giving any special help towards winning the war and defeating the object of the raiders.

But it must not be thought that it was only in the raided areas that W.V.S. Housewives took part in the war effort. In the country as much, if not more, gallantry was shown by those women who had never experienced air raids and so had no spur of danger and excitement to activate them. They, too, gave their share of service in numerous ways:-

- Caring for the children of other women in order to set them free to do war work.

- Growing vegetables in neglected gardens and distributing them.

- Giving hospitality to members of H.M. Forces.

- Arranging and collecting salvage.

- Organising Street National Savings Groups.

- Collecting clothing to be sent to Air Raid victims.

- Helping with emergency feeding arrangements.

- Collecting eggs for hospitals.

- Co-operating with the Wardens in any way asked of them.

- Helping with kitchen waste propaganda and Rest Centre organisation.

- Organising "spotters" classes.

Arranging for telephone contact in scattered areas in the event of an emergency.

Staffing and organising "First Aid Points".

These were only a few of the many activities of rural W.V.S. Housewives.

Gas

In many areas Anti-Gas schemes were arranged.

W.V.S. Housewives were sufficiently trained to be able to give home treatment to "gas" casualties.

In many places they assisted in the distribution and fitting of "Contex" to respirators and of "Baby Protective Helmets".

They arranged in the event of gas attacks for certain members to go to the houses of women where there were several small children, difficult for the mother alone to manage, and Anti-Gas training, shortened and simple, was generally given to members of the Service throughout the country.

General reaction to this service

The existence of a branch of the W.V.S. Housewives' Service in a locality made for solidarity. Women who had never before joined any type of organisation found in this service an outlet for all the experience, the common-sense, the organisation which they had hitherto expended only on their own homes. Here was an opportunity to pool individual talents for the good of all - a Service to which any woman could belong, no matter how difficult her home ties. Her own service - that was the attraction - and moreover a service within the even greater service, W.V.S. In this way the most humble housewife could feel herself one with others differently placed, with W.V.S. Housewives in far distant places, could learn what her sisters in these far-off towns were doing. It had a stimulating, exhilarating effect.

One old lady, a member of the Service, who had been ill, informed her doctor that she felt much better. She said, "It is very stimulating at 75 to be fighting the devil!"

Another, as she sat mending the very "holey" socks belonging to Wardens at the nearby Post, said, "I may be an old crock, but I can still help the boys who are helping to beat that man!"

Their humour 'was ineradicable. At a time when the air raid warning usually came regularly at 7 o'clock each night, a member of the Service on her way to the family she stayed with during raids heard the siren at 6.50* "Drat the man!" she said. "He can't even stick to his time-table!" And proceeded on her way unruffled, but annoyed at the German lack of punctuality.

By the end of 1940, the ranks had swelled to approximately 191,589 - 49,250 in the London Region, 10,000 in Scotland and 132,339 in the rest of the country. Nearly every town and a very large number of villages had their own branch of this Section of W.V.S.

1941

During 1941, branches of the W.V.S. Housewives' Service consolidated their position. The neighbourly, friendly aspect of the Service was developed. The plan of the Wardens' Post as the centre and the street as the basic unit was more closely adhered to and branches which had not followed this pattern reorganised in order to do so.

With the further absorption of women in the war effort, yet more opportunities for service showed themselves and they were very varied.

In the more vulnerable areas

General

Assisting Wardens with house to house census.

Keeping record of "raid arrangements" of neighbours. (Shelter, roll-call, absentees, visitors, etc.)

Arranging to exchange hospitality with other members of the Service should enemy action make it necessary.

Helping with emergency cooking schemes, building emergency kitchens in gardens and back-yards and learning to use them.

Storing salvaged unusable timber, peat or fir-cones for fuel for emergency cookers.

Learning Air Raid Message writing.

Arranging street cleaning squads for communal domestic shelters. Enrolling as Shelter Wardens.

Organising "play groups" for children in shelters and in the open air during daylight hours.

Fire prevention

Learning to protect homes from fire.

Joining the local Fire Guards and assisting them with social arrangements.

Anti-gas

Acquiring knowledge of anti-gas precautions; (a) Personal (b) Food.

Learning all about the Baby Protective Helmet.

Helping with repair of gas-masks and protective clothing.

Organising Home Gas Cleansing Schemes.

Arranging "gas-mask" games for children, in order to make them used to their masks.

Neighbourly

Helping at Rest Centres.

Helping at Clothing Depots.

Helping at Casualty Bureaux

Helping with filling in of War Damage Claims.

Helping to make damaged houses habitable.

Helping with salvage from damaged houses.

Cleaning and preparing new homes for the homeless.

Visiting the re-housed.

Arranging little social meetings at each other's houses.

Getting in touch with lonely people.

Special

Helping with National Savings Street Groups.

Helping with Salvage Campaign.

Mending Parties (for members of H.M. Forces, the Civil Defence Services and Evacuees.)

Work in Canteens and Community Feeding Centres.

Helping in gardens and allotments. Helping industrial workers by:-

- i. Arranging to do housekeeping for neighbours engaged in industry.
- ii. Assistance with housework for women so engaged.
- iii. Arranging to meet children from school and get tea for them.

Offering to "mother" men or women in the services or girls engaged in industry working away from home.

In November 1941 the literature for the service was brought up to date and it was at this time that a motto was adopted:

"A LITTLE THING IS A LITTLE THING, BUT FAITHFULNESS IN LITTLE THINGS IS A VERY GREAT THING."

The work of the individual members of the Service had at that time been likened to that of the little boats at Dunkirk, where one alone could have done little, but where, working together, almost a miracle had been accomplished.

The national side of the work was more and more stressed and members began to feel that there was almost kinship in the joint possession of the blue window cards. Pride of service grew at the same time as numbers increased. At the end of the year there were approximately 238,532 members - 54,266 in London Region, 169,532 in the rest of the country, including Wales, and 15,000 in Scotland.

1942

In May 1942, there were approximately 321,309 members of the Housewives' Service of W.V.S. What an immense growth in only three years - what a record of service given - what promise for the future!

During the growth of the Service much latent talent for organisation had been found in individual housewives, and early in 1942 it was decided that more scope and responsibility should be possible for them than could be arranged under the existing type of organisation. It was felt that the cutting of Civil Defence personnel and the part-time absorption of many members of the Civil Defence Services into industry and the Home Guard, made it necessary for W.V.S, to concentrate on breaking down their organisation to the smallest possible - the street unit - thus providing for a chain of responsibility:- the Centre Organiser, Divisional or District Representative, Post or Group Representatives and the Street Key Representative.

In order to carry this out effectively, and to give members of the Housewives' Service an opportunity for further responsibility and a feeling of "one-ness" with the whole of W.V.S., the name of the Service "was changed to "'Housewives' Section of W.V.S."

The Basic Training Scheme for all members of W.V.S, came into being on April 10th 1942.

By means of this scheme it was made possible for any member showing aptitude for the holding of responsibility to have an outlet for her talents, to take a leading part in the organisation of W.V.S, in her own particular neighbourhood.

This scheme made it possible, too, for W.V.S, to take a far greater part in Civil Defence proper; and in this the Housewives' Section of W.V.S, will give, as they

have always given, the solid backing, the determination, the steadfastness, which must lead to success and continued success.

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