

# **THE FORMATION AND FOUNDING OF THE WOMEN'S VOLUNTARY SERVICES FOR A.R.P.**

**ROYAL VOLUNTARY SERVICE  
HERITAGE COLLECTION**

**AUTHOR: MATTHEW MCMURRAY – KEEPER OF HERITAGE**

First published by Royal Voluntary Service 2008

This fact sheet is distributed under a CC Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC BY-NC-ND) Creative Commons licence.

This work is copyright © Royal Voluntary Service 2008-2021.

Enquiries regarding use of the material contained in this fact sheet not covered by the Creative Commons licence, or the principals of fair dealing should be directed in the first instance to: [heritage@royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk](mailto:heritage@royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk)

Royal Voluntary Service is a registered charity with charity number 1015988 & SC038924 and is a limited company registered in England and Wales with company number 2520413. Registered office Beck Court, Cardiff Gate Business Park, Cardiff, CF23 8RP

# THE FORMATION AND FOUNDING OF THE WOMEN'S VOLUNTARY SERVICES FOR A.R.P

---

The exact nature of the events that led up to the formation of the WVS are not entirely clear cut and are of course open to interpretation. An initial exchange of ideas was being conducted privately between Sir Samuel Hoare (Home Secretary) and Lady Reading through April or perhaps as early as March 1938. Any correspondence from these early discussions have yet to come to light but may be contained in their personal papers, especially those of Lady Reading.

The first known correspondence, in the Home Office (HO) establishment file held at The National Archives (HO 356/2), between the two is dated 29 April 1938 and is part of a series of behind the scenes arrangements. In it Lady Reading begins:

*"Dear Sir Samuel*

*I have thought carefully over your suggestion that a drive should be made to get women into the A.R.P. services, and I have talked it over with your Mr. Eady."<sup>1</sup>*

Wilfred Eady was a civil servant and Deputy Under Secretary of State in charge of A.R.P.<sup>2</sup> and discussions were clearly at a fairly advanced stage as Lady Reading goes on to discuss, in some detail, her requirements. The letter also includes her wish that:

*"...this work is done in alliance with the Home Office and not merely as part of your departmental organisation. I think you will agree if we succeed in enrolling the women we will be ... more successful as an outside body working with you than as your officers."<sup>3</sup>*

1

---

<sup>1</sup> TNA / HO 356/2 /29 April 1938, Lady Reading to Sir Samuel Hoare. p1.

<sup>2</sup> History of the Home Office 1782-1982, <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ERORrecords/HO/415/1/webwork/hohist.htm> (viewed 18 February 2008)

<sup>3</sup> TNA / HO 356/2 /29 April 1938, Lady Reading to Sir Samuel Hoare. p1.

It was clearly a condition of Lady Reading's co-operation that the new women's organisation be 'independent', or as independent as possible within the position it found itself. Her reiteration of the point suggests that independence at this point was not perhaps secure and this is possibly borne out by a line in a later letter from Wilfred Eady to T W Phillips of the Ministry of Labour.

"I am also making it clear to Lady Reading, as I informed Wolfe, that in the event of war this women's organisation would not function independently but would come under control of the war-cover authority."<sup>4</sup>

Attached to the letter was a 'short', two foolscap pages, note, as she called it, with six extended points indicating "the lines on which we should work".<sup>5</sup>

Summarised, these were:

1. The organisation will work in association with the HO and local authorities on A.R.P.
  
2. Aims
  - a) To stimulate enrolment of women in A.R.P to bring those services up to mobilisation strength.
  - b) To inform all women about air raids and what they can do for their families
  
3. The organisation would consist of:
  - a) An advisory council of representatives of all the chief women's organisations in the country.
  - b) A small executive committee of selected persons.
  
4. Country divided into ten regions each in charge of a Regional Officer. However, to hasten enrolment, the first appeal would be launched from headquarters.

1

---

<sup>4</sup> TNA / HO 356/2 /13 May 1938, Wilfred Eady to T.W. Phillips.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

5. Regional Officer would be responsible for liaising with local authorities and arranging to enrol women.

The women would be enrolled as a 'local unit' but these units would be part of the local authority service and, as posted to their appropriate service, would come under the control of the appropriate officer.

To be successful the movement must be based upon training which includes from the very beginning regular 'exercises' and must create some sense of belonging to some corporate organisation.

When the necessary proficiency has been reached some distinctive sign such as a scarf or 'what not' might be supplied to members of local units.

6. It will be the responsibility of the local authority to provide training and exercises for the women enrolled.

Six days later, on 4 May, Lady Reading received a letter marked 'personal' from Sir Samuel Hoare, in a rather effusive style, asking if she would "Consider this possibility in conjunction with other women who have taken part in public affairs and social work." <sup>6</sup> To start a "women's organisation ... which would work closely in association with the Home Office and would stimulate interest among women in the A.R.P." <sup>7</sup> She visited him the next day 5th May.<sup>8</sup>

As can be seen above this was almost a fait accompli by the time Sir Samuel sent his letter on 4 May. Only the final details seem to have been outstanding and the majority of these must have been discussed at the 5 May meeting.

1

---

<sup>6</sup> WRVS / 896 / Imperial War Museum / 4 May 1938 Sir Samuel Hoare to Lady Reading.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> WRVS / 215 / Executive Committee minutes 1938-1946, p.173.

The almost verbatim use of Lady Reading's words in his letter is telling, and it seems possible that the whole idea of a women's organisation for A.R.P. may in fact have been Lady Reading's.

The day before, 3 May, internal letters had been sent out, presumably in the same vein (a formal record), to Sir James Rae, Under Secretary and Treasury Establishment Officer, from Wilfred Eady, and from Hoare to Walter Elliot, M.P, and Secretary of State for Scotland (both men already knew of the proposal). The former setting out the elements of the scheme which would need funding, stating:

*"It is very difficult to give you any idea of the total cost of the Government contribution but I should think it might be in the neighbourhood of £15,000 a year, possibly a little more."*<sup>9</sup>

the latter asking Elliot to select "...one or more suitable Scottish women..." to sit "...on the advisory council...".<sup>10</sup>

By 10 May, Lady Reading had met with Sir Warren Fisher, Permanent Secretary to the Treasury,<sup>11</sup> presumably to hammer out the final details of the funding requirements. A confidential memo from Eady to Sir Samuel states that:

"If the debate is fixed for Monday and you wish to be able to announce the formation of the Committee, it would be necessary for you to see these ladies no later than Friday."<sup>12</sup>

'These ladies' were:

Lady Ruth Balfour - National Council of Women of Great Britain

Lady Denman - National Federation of Women's Institutes

1

---

<sup>9</sup> TNA / HO 356/2 / 3 May 1938, from Wilfred Eady to Sir James Rae.

<sup>10</sup> TNA / HO 356/2 / 3 May 1938, from Sir Samuel Hoare to Walter Elliot.

<sup>11</sup> TNA / HO 356/2 / 10 May 1938, from Wilfred Eady to Sir Samuel Hoare.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Mrs Eva Hubback - National Council for Equal Citizenship  
Miss Caroline Haslett - British Federation of Business and Professional Women  
Miss Joan Loring - National Union of Townswomens Guilds  
Dr F.H. Melville - Federation of University Women  
Mrs Montague Norman  
Lady Reading  
Lady Somers - Girl Guide Association  
Miss Phillipa Strachey - London and National society for Womens Service  
Mrs Dale - Womens Co-operative.

A letter was sent out the next day, 11 May, by Sir Samuel asking them to attend a meeting at the home office at 11:30am on Monday 16.

*"I am anxious to see an organisation set up, based on the chief women's organisations of the country, ... I have persuaded the Dowager Lady Reading to act as Chairman, and I should very much like to have an opportunity of discussing the aims of the movement and its organisation with you..."*<sup>13</sup>

This invitation was of course all Lady Reading's idea, but had been sent out by the Home Secretary at Lady Reading's request.

*"As regards the women's organisations I think an invitation from you to them will be necessary, because although I do not want them to think that it is an entirely official organisation under the Home Office, equally I do not want them to imagine that I am creating a personal organisation."*<sup>14</sup>

These ladies were to be the core of Lady Reading's advisory council, mentioned in her 29 April letter. Some "Very rough notes", a draft of the "broad outlines on which the

1

---

<sup>13</sup> TNA / HO 356/2 / 11 May 1938, Draft of letter from Sir Samuel Hoare to Mrs Dale.

<sup>14</sup> TNA / HO 356/2 /29 April 1938, Lady Reading to Sir Samuel Hoare. p3. *ibid.*

organisation might be handled",<sup>15</sup> sent on 12 May from Lady Reading to Mr Hutchinson back up this point.

*"The scheme to be worked out on the nucleus of representative women meeting the secretary of state as the basis of a Ground 13 Council. This Council to be enlarged by the addition of the other big existing womens organisations." <sup>16</sup>*

A short note, written by Eady, about this meeting suggests that it was nothing more than a discussion. It would appear that the Home Secretary "discussed the purpose of the new scheme" and "As he conceived it this organisation would have complete freedom of action and criticism."<sup>17</sup> Then: "After some further discussion the members present decided to discuss the situation further among themselves." <sup>18</sup>

Although the deal was effectively done, Lady Reading clearly saw the inclusion of these ladies in the process of significant importance, and it would appear that key changes came as a consequence.

In her 'very rough notes' sent to Mr. Hutchinson on 12 May she says.

*"The service to be a voluntary organisation which might be termed the Womens Enrolment League, ..." <sup>19</sup>*

Up to that point the scheme had variously been referred to, in internal and external memos and letters, as 'the women's organisation' or 'Lady Reading's organisation'.

However on the afternoon of 18 May, in the final draft of her 'broad outlines', Lady Reading partially includes what was to become the official name of the organisation.

1

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> TNA / HO 356/2 / 12 May 1938, Lady Reading to Mr Hutchinson, attached notes p.2

<sup>17</sup> TNA / HO 356/2 / 18 May 1938, Note by Wilfred Eady entitled Women's Enrolment League.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> TNA / HO 356/2 / 12 May 1938, Lady Reading Mr Hutchinson, attached notes p.2

*"A grand council under the name of the Women's Voluntary Services to be formed by a nucleus of representatives of women's organisations either joining in their public or Private capacity."*<sup>20</sup>

The notes Eady had written about 16 May meeting are dated 18 May, and are entitled "Women's Enrolment League".<sup>21</sup> He must have written this early that day, as that morning he also had a meeting with Stella Reading. They discussed her 'broad outlines'<sup>22</sup> and it must have been at this meeting that the name was agreed. It thus seems likely that the name emanated either from 16 May meeting, with the ladies of the women's organisations, or from suggestions sent to Lady Reading by the participants as part of the further discussions 'among themselves'. It would appear that Lady Reading had conceded the point!

The meeting also seems to have served to better define the 'terms of reference' for the organisation, 18 May document having little of the exact 12 May text remaining, with better definition of the structure of the regional offices and supervisors as well as a clearer outline of the services for which enrolment of women would be called.

It also seems possible that these ladies were asked if they would serve on the 'advisory council' should the organisation go ahead.

At 11:00am on 19 May Lady Reading attended a meeting with Sir Samuel Hoare.<sup>23</sup> This would be the last meeting between the two, before the official written sanction of the organisation. They presumably discussed, and Sir Samuel approved, Lady Reading's final draft of her 'broad outlines' and also her amendments to the official letter, which she had sent to Eady the previous day.

1

---

<sup>20</sup> TNA / HO 356/2 / 18 May 1938, Cut down draft of 'broad outlines'

<sup>21</sup> TNA / HO 356/2 / 18 May 1938, Note by Wilfred Eady entitled Women's Enrolment League.

<sup>22</sup> TNA / HO 356/2 / 18 May 1938, Lady Reading to Wilfred Eady.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

That letter was sent the following day 20 May 1938 addressed to Lady Reading.<sup>24</sup>

It would be almost another month before the public were informed of the formation of the W.V.S. On 16 June 1938<sup>25</sup> Sir Samuel made a speech to the House of Commons at 4:45pm and two days later on 18 June the Women's Voluntary Services actually came into being.<sup>26</sup>

Throughout the whole process, from 29 April to 20 May, work had been going on in the background, undertaken principally and initially by Mary Smieton.

Lady Reading wanted a "...really efficient General Secretary..."<sup>27</sup> and there was "...no doubt in my own mind that Mary Smieton of the Ministry of Labour is the woman I want"<sup>28</sup> Clearly, to some extent at least, Lady Reading always got what she wanted. Thus began what seems to have been a process of string pulling, personal favours and rank pulling to prise Mary Smieton from the Ministry of Labour. In a letter to James Rae, at the Treasury, Eady says:

*"Lady Reading is very anxious to secure a general secretary, on loan from the Ministry of Labour, Miss Smieton, whom she knows and likes, and who is a very competent woman, capable of organising the head office and of getting on well with an executive committee."*<sup>29</sup>

Lady Reading made an appeal to Sir Samuel to help secure Mary Smieton:

*"If you approve I shall ask Mr. Brown to lend her to me for this important national work, at any rate until the end of the year. I expect that he will*

1

---

<sup>24</sup> WRVS / 896 / Imperial War Museum / 20 May 1938 Home Secretary to Lady Reading (printed copy 6/38)

<sup>25</sup> WRVS / 896 / Official Government Statements 16 June 1938.

<sup>26</sup> WRVS / 215 / Executive Committee minutes 1938-1946, p.173

<sup>27</sup> TNA / HO 356/2 /29 April 1938, Lady Reading to Sir Samuel Hoare. p1.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> TNA / HO 356/2 /3 May 1938, Wilfred Eady to Sir James Rae.

*make difficulties and I hope that I can count on you to support me by personal intervention with him."* <sup>30</sup>

By 13 May Miss Smeiton had been secured, on loan, "...despite great inconvenience..."<sup>31</sup> to T.W. Phillips of the Ministry of Labour, but the loan was only until the end of the year at which time it would be re-considered.<sup>32</sup> On the 12 May Lady Reading had clearly been given the room in Horseferry House (the offices of the A.R.P.) she had requested<sup>33</sup> as she was by then writing on Home Office, A.R.P. headed notepaper.<sup>34</sup>

Her 'headquarter offices' had been secured and Mary Smieton had started work by 16 May, as she used 41 Tothill Street as her reply address on a letter to Eady that day.<sup>35</sup> The letter and attachment are her job description, which it would appear she had written herself!

It is interesting that Lady Reading, Eady and Samuel Hoare were sitting having a discussion with women's organisation leaders about the possible scope and structure of what would become the W.V.S. when the work had obviously already started.

A 'Memorandum on Regional Organisation and Development' dated 19 May introduces the final key member of staff, who had probably been at Tothill Street from the start, Lindsay Huxley, who was Regional Officer. The memorandum outlines the steps necessary to properly develop the organisation's regional structure, and reinforces earlier statements by Lady Reading about the need to make use of women once they are enrolled not put them "back on to the shelf".<sup>36</sup>

*"It is presumed that before long a public announcement giving the full weight of Government approval will be made through the wireless, press,*

1

---

<sup>30</sup> TNA / HO 356/2 /29 April 1938, Lady Reading to Sir Samuel Hoare. p2.

<sup>31</sup> TNA / HO 356/2 / 13 May 1938, Wilfred Eady to T.W. Phillips.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> TNA / HO 356/2 /29 April 1938, Lady Reading to Sir Samuel Hoare. p1.

<sup>34</sup> TNA / HO 356/2 / 12 May 1938, Lady Reading to Mr Hutchinson

<sup>35</sup> TNA / HO 356/2 /16 May 1938, Mary Smieton to Wilfred Eady

<sup>36</sup> TNA / HO 356/2 /29 April 1938, Lady Reading to Sir Samuel Hoare. attachment, p1.

*etc. but such an appeal to be effective should be followed by local meetings and enrolment and training. In some districts there has been much discouragement caused already through offers of service being given and no practical use being made of the recruit following enrolment. If an announcement must be made for political reasons before the regional organisations are in working order it should be restricted to a general statement and no stimulation of national and local interest should be undertaken till the regions are ready." <sup>37</sup>*

This statement can perhaps be seen as the reason behind the delay between Lady Reading's receipt of the letter from the Home Secretary, of 20 May, and the public announcement by Samuel Hoare on 16 June 1938. The formation of the WVS was unofficially extremely quick, only three weeks, but what seems certain is that there were several informal discussions between Sir Samuel Hoare, Wilfred Eady and Lady Reading before 29 April 1938. Lady Reading's contacts, knowledge and determination made sure that the process was pushed along and that everything she needed was in place. At that point Mary Smieton's attention to detail and efficiency meant that Lady Reading's ideas could be turned into reality. Lady Reading had by 11 May, or a few days before, been 'persuaded' to be the Chairman, and it was her idea to involve all the women's organisations in her 'grand committee' that probably secured a smoother and more successful passage of the scheme than would otherwise have been possible. Thus three women (and probably a few ministry assistants and typists) started, in May 1938, an organisation that aimed to recruit one million women to help in case of war. They had reached that target by the end of November 1941, and 70 years later the organisation is still in existence.

1

---

<sup>37</sup> WRVS / 896 / Miscellaneous papers of special interest / 19 May 1938, L.K. Huxley.