

THE STORY OF WVS BRISTOL 1939-1945

**ROYAL VOLUNTARY SERVICE
HERITAGE COLLECTION**

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SUMMARY

Bristol is a County Borough and part of Region 7. The reports held in the WRVS Archive and Heritage Collection for Bristol during the Second World War cover 1940-1945. These records are Narrative Reports, Quarter Reports and Reports from the Clothing Depot 74 Park Street Avenue, Bristol.

There is no information present in County Borough Correspondence or any files relating to Avon and there is also no mention of Clifton Rocks Railway within the Reports.

There are only two photographs available of WVS work in Bristol during the Second World War and they are of Mobile Canteen Services (the details of these services can be found in the Appendices).

The WVS in Bristol provided an essential service to the Community; they set up static and mobile canteens to feed the Dockers and those who had been affected by the terrible air raids that hit the city. Clothing depots and make do and mend parties provided clothing for evacuees and a housewives service was created which helped with all aspects of war, such as salvage and blood transfusions.

During wartime the city was visited four times by Lady Reading and each time it was recorded that she boosted moral and provided sympathetic words to the WVS members who were suffering under the strain of providing these essential services.

THE STORY

The month by month Narrative reports, created during the Second World War, hold within them detailed accounts of the essential services WVS provided to Bristol during a critical and testing time in British history. The Narrative reports which exist today for Bristol cover 1940-1945. Collectively they are great written examples of the voluntary work carried out by ordinary women who wanted to play a part in the war effort. When analysed, these reports record the services these women provided during wartime. These services were adapted, expanded and created due to the need of the community and the nation as a whole.

The first Narrative Report held in the WRVS Archive and Heritage Collection for the period 1938-1945 is the report for April 1940. It states that by this time there were 1,500 trained members of WVS working within Bristol.¹ Since war began twelve canteens had been established in the City, all providing meals to those in need. In May 1940 these canteens were providing food to the stretcher parties who were transporting wounded soldiers from Bristol's railway station. By June 1940 the canteen service in Bristol had enlarged considerably and was feeding over 2,000 people a week!²

Due to this expansion there was a call for the reorganization of the canteen service, which happened during July 1940. By this time there were thirteen ARP canteens, four canteens serving those on Government or services business and one canteen for WAAFS, all serving meals at a cost of 8d. A Dockers canteen was then set up on the 30th July which provided 1 ½ pint mugs of tea for 1 ½ d and "The Dockers egg" for 3d all year round. By August 1940 a further four canteens had been opened which were fully staffed night and day, serving meals consisting of a joint, two types of vegetables and a sweet.³

During 1940 there was also the introduction of mobile canteens and by September 1940 these were working all day with the YMCA and all night feeding the Dockers.

Static and mobile canteens were not the only service WVS provided for the community. WVS also acted as a distributing agent for the great quantities of clothing for the relief of war distress.⁴ A clothing department for example was established during 1940 and this would organize the creation of clothing from material donated by the American Red cross. It was also responsible for the

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¹ WRVS/NR/R7/1940-CB/BRI/April

² Ibid.

³ WRVS/NR/R7/1940-CB/BRI/July

⁴ WVS, *Report of ten year's work for the Nation (1938-1948)*,

care and distribution of stocks of clothing to those in need, such as evacuees and those affected by air raids.

In July 1940 the ARP created a Housewives Service in Bristol, and the Housewives started to help in the blood transfusion depot. As there had to be triplicate copies of all blood donors registrations made, the Housewives Service were asked to collectively write three registration cards, identification cards and envelopes five times for each of the 30,000 registrations. They did such a splendid job that each Housewife received a letter of thanks from Brig General Whitby.⁵

The Narrative report for August 1940 records that a day nursery for under-fives had been opened in Bristol. It was being staffed by WVS members from 7.30 in the morning to 6 in the evening.⁶ By April 1943, 14 of these war time nurseries had been open to help care for the children of mothers who were being called up for compulsory war work.⁷

During the Second World War, Bristol was the fifth most heavily bombed British City. The presence of Bristol Harbour and Bristol Aeroplane Company made the city a target for bombing. There were six major bombing raids between 24th November 1940 and 11th April 1941.⁸ During this time 1,299 people were killed, 1,303 seriously injured and 697 had to be rescued from debris.⁹

The Narrative Report for December 1940 to January 1941 is a very detailed example of how WVS aided Bristol during a succession of air raids. The report states that this was a “really testing time for WVS members, a time where plans which had been developed during the year had to be rapidly put into action.”¹⁰

The Housewives service, which had been developed in the July, was now over 9,000 members strong and proved invaluable, providing clothing, bedding and furniture by the van load.¹¹

The emergency drivers worked day and night, using their own cars to transport those affected by the bombings.

There were now four mobile canteens in operation which proved invaluable, having been out immediately when they were called for and frequently staying

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⁵ WRVS/NR/R7/1944-CB/BRI/June-September

⁶ WRVS/NR/R7/1940-CB/BRI/August

⁷ WRVS/NR/R7/1943-CB/BRI/April

⁸ *Bristol Blitzed Overview, Bristol Blitzed* [Online]. Available at: www.bristolblitzed.org (11 July 2012).

⁹ John Duncan, Edwin Webb, *Blitz over Britain* (1990), 90.

¹⁰ WRVS/NR/R7/1940-1941-CB/BRI/December– January

¹¹ *Ibid.*

throughout the Blitz, they served the fire and casualty services and visited between 2,000 and 3,000 troops.¹²

There were lots of communal feeding and soup kitchens created to feed anyone in need and they worked alongside the 18 canteens which served 2,146 people daily.¹³

This report also highlights the great devastation the air raids brought upon Bristol and the risk members of the WVS took when serving the public. Two of the canteens for example were bombed, but to show the great resilience of WVS members with regards to serving their community, one was back in operation the next day in a stable!¹⁴

The Hospital supply depots were badly affected by the air raids, losing a great deal of reliable stores and resources. Even the WVS Office at 38 Prince Street Bristol was destroyed by enemy action and had to be rebuilt.

Whilst helping during the air raids many of the WVS members became casualties themselves, with one WVS Voluntary Ambulance driver even losing her life whilst serving during the Blitz. The Report concludes that:

“Many of our volunteers deserve the highest praise for their spirit and devotion to duty all through these trying times, with one lady even being recommended for the George medal due to her bravery.”¹⁵

It was during April 1941, in the aftermath of the heavy air raids and devastation, that the Bristol Holiday Scheme was started. It provided holiday's and rest camps for those in the community who were suffering under the strain of the air raids.

In May 1941, the first batch of 100 bombed out or overstrained mothers and children left for a fortnights rest at Sidmouth.¹⁶

Between May and June 1941 a rest camp for mothers and children was opened at Hinnegar, Badminton. Mrs Gwyn was in charge of this service and parties were leaving for the camp every fortnight. It could accommodate 300 people and by the time it closed for winter in September 1941 it had provided holidays for over 2,000 mothers and children. By February 1943 the Bristol Holiday

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¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ WRVS/NR/R7/1941-CB/BRI/May

Scheme had sent away over 5,189 people, all suffering in some way from air raid and the distress of war. These people would be placed either in private billets in Somerset, Gloucester, Dorset, Wiltshire and Cornwall or in the only WVS holiday centre at Studland Dene Hotel, Alum Chine, Bournemouth.¹⁷

Also during 1941 the static and mobile canteens were in continuous demand. 14 new small auxiliary canteens for first aid workers had been set up and there were now 450 WVS members working in the canteen service. By August the mobile canteens were feeding the Dockers three times a day, 7 days a week, totalling 1,200 meals a day. In October 1941 the WVS were congratulated by the Home Guard for their catering and canteen efforts.

The Narrative Report held for January – February 1942 details that Mrs. Beloe and her helpers had moved the clothing depot to more modern and larger premises at 74 Park Street, Bristol. By May and August a new clothing depot was being opened for the English Speaking Union, staffed by the WVS under Mrs Burgess.

During June 1942 WVS housewives cooperated with authorities for a large scale invasion exercise and were warmly praised for their proficiency and helpfulness. Through the demonstrative exercise they also managed to recruit 300 new members to the Housewives Service.

There were over 30 static canteens serving those in need by July 1942. Through serving the public the mobile canteens managed to donate £100 of their profits to the YMCA, towards a new mobile library, all in memory of Mrs Cook, a mobile driver, who lost her life whilst on duty in Bristol.¹⁸

Between May and August 1942 two canteens were opened for US troops, with three WVS members helping at each with all the entertainment and amenities. There were now 14 mobile canteens, whose work had increased greatly due to the influx of American Forces.¹⁹

A demonstration took place on November 6th 1942, when Bristol had the great honour of a visit from Mrs Roosevelt and Lady Reading. Miss Ward, Head of Bristol Housewives Service, had arranged a realistic demonstration of the work WVS would be involved in during and after an air raid. "Mock sirens were sounded and bombs and incendiaries were represented, setting fire to huts from which 'victims' were rescued and given first aid and relief."²⁰

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¹⁷ WRVS/NR/R7/1943-CB/BRI/February

¹⁸ WRVS/NR/R7/1942-CB/BRI/July

¹⁹ WRVS/NR/R7/1942-CB/BRI/May-August

²⁰ WRVS/NR/R7/1942-CB/BRI/October-November

Emergency cookers were set up and Mrs Roosevelt was served soup, which she warmly praised. The report states that “She seemed extremely interested and said that she was making notes and was very glad to see such a practical demonstration of the help women can give to their neighbours under these conditions.”²¹

By the end of 1942 the work the WVS had been doing for the dockers was recognized by the presentation of meritorious service medals to: Mrs Thomas, Mrs Kingdom (supplies officer) and Mrs Lennard (Avonmouth Docks Mobiles supervisor), the only members of the Dockers union to be rewarded. The presentation was given by Mr Deakins of the Transport Workers Union at the Bristol office. It was recorded that by April 1943 the mobile canteens were serving an average of 3,000 meals daily to Dockers at the Avonmouth Docks.²²

In October 1943 the canteen at Southmead Hospital was being staffed by over 200 WVS helpers, who staffed the canteen in shifts from 7am to 9pm daily. In November this canteen managed to raise over £3,000 for various charities and brought equipment for the hospital. This profit was nearly all made on the innumerable cups of tea and coffee sold. The canteen quickly became regarded as the cheapest and best luncheon in Town, all thanks to the splendid management of Mrs Phillips, who originally set up the canteen.²³

By December 1943 the Housewives Service had become very involved in the war effort and was now distributing fruit juice to children, canvassing for blood transfusion and helping with school dinners in every part of town.

In March 1944 the Housewives Section report informs that the Housewives had managed to exceed their target of 50,000 blood donors by over 2,000. Blood donation was called the “pipe line of life” and the ABTS considered the accomplishment of the Housewives deserving of a visit from two ABTS officers thanking the Housewives for their work with the House to House, street and cinema canvasses.²⁴

Once D Day arrived and there was an urgent need for blood transfusions, the housewives and the Depot were working night and day. They made up over 800 filters and drippers each week, prepared test tubes and canvassed for more recruits. For their hard work they received a message from Major Laycock saying “Tell the Housewives of K group that they are helping us tremendously and their work is excellent”.²⁵

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²¹ Ibid.

²² WRVS/NR/R7/1943-CB/BRI/April

²³ WRVS/NR/R7/1943-CB/BRI/October

²⁴ WRVS/NR/R7/1944-CB/BRI/June-September

²⁵ Ibid.

The Housewives were also involved in salvage collection. They were so successful in their canvassing that it was announced in the Press in April 1944 that the Housewives section of Bristol had collected more salvage per head than any other large provincial City, this was thanks to the six WVS housewives Salvage officers, 90 helpers who have the city salvage badge and 410 helpers, all of whom were housewives.²⁶

On April 9th 1944 Lady Reading made another visit to WVS in Bristol. A snack lunch party was given at the College Green Offices and after lunch the new 'Bristol' Restaurant, which was to be opened at the end of the month, was inspected. This restaurant would provide music and entertainment, as well as refreshments and would be open 5.30 to 10.30pm every day.

In the afternoon Lady Reading returned to the office and addressed a gathering of about 60 WVS heads of departments. She inspected two make and mend parties at work and took tea. The report states that:

"After dinner Lady Reading rounded off this very full day by bringing out her knitting, one of the children's vests, with which we are all now so familiar. We all feel heartened and encouraged by what Lady Reading had to say, that tired feeling seemed to disappear after listening to her."²⁷

During July 1944 London was heavily bombed, many residents were fleeing London and seeking solace in other cities. It was during this time that the ARP in Bristol had to contend with an influx of many unofficial evacuees. The citizens of Bristol rallied to the cause and an amazing number of people came to offer private hospitality, allowing the ARP to house 60 mothers and children.²⁸

By August 1944 the ARP had found billets for over 200 mothers and their children who had unofficially evacuated from London and by September 1944 these evacuees had returned to London.²⁹

Not only were WVS in Bristol asked to house the unofficial evacuees, they were also asked to provide reinforcements to London when WVS headquarters issued an urgent SOS for aid and reinforcements to cope with the constant demand on WVS services. Six clothing experts were dispatched from Bristol and left with only 24 hours' notice for London, staying for several days to help wherever needed.

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²⁶ WRVS/NR/R7/1944-CB/BRI/April

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ WRVS/NR/R7/1944-CB/BRI/July

²⁹ WRVS/NR/R7/1944-CB/BRI/August

During December 1944 Bristol suffered terrible weather conditions, the mobile canteens had to contend with terrible road surfaces and fog, making driving conditions traitorous over the narrow bridges and railway lines amongst the open docks. The mobile canteens, which were relied upon by so many, braved these dreadful conditions and managed to arrive at the docks. Their arrival was greeted with a “three hearty cheer by the Dockers, who had not expected them to appear”³⁰.

This perilous weather continued into January 1945 where, during the height of frost, the Mobile canteens managed to make the four mile drive, which started down a hill that no other car would even attempt. “How they ever got to the docks in the fog, snow and ice is difficult to say, but they were never late and never missed a day!”³¹

Also during January, two allocations of beautiful toys from Belgium arrived for the children of Bristol, some of which had messages attached for the children from their fathers on active service.

In February 1945 Lady Reading returned to Bristol. The chairman was recorded as being “sympathetic, putting new heart and the will to carry on into all of those who heard her speak.”³² At this stage it was becoming apparent that the members of the WVS were becoming weary of the pressures war work placed upon them, so they welcomed the Chairman’s suggestion that full time work may be staggered so those who were rather tired can have a day off now and then. During her visit Lady Reading inspected a local American Hospital where she unveiled a mural painting, a tribute from a Bristol woman artist.

During 1945 the Housewives Service had become involved in giving help to the old and infirm, whilst shopping and assisting the ill. They were also arranging happy parties for the English and American wounded, which were well attended and very popular. One such party, the Mothers party, was held on Saturday 24th March 1945 at the University settlement, Barton Hill. 75 wounded American soldiers and sailors together with 40 young women and 15 soldiers who were on leave in the district made up the guest list.

The description from the Narrative Report describes the hall as:

“Gladly clad with flags, the platform with spring flowers and the tables with daffs and primroses, picked by school children and sent from Devon especially.”³³

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³⁰ WRVS/NR/R7/1944-CB/BRI/December

³¹ WRVS/NR/R7/1945-CB/BRI/January

³² WRVS/NR/R7/1945-CB/BRI/February

³³ WRVS/NR/R7/1945-CB/BRI/March

The party was opened by welcoming the guests and asking them to:

“Make the party by going gay and hearty – its mother’s party so forget the outside with its troubles and horrors and enjoy these hours together as you would if it really was your mother’s party.”³⁴

There was tap dancing, accordion playing and community singing with dances for the young and the old such as the rumba, Paul Jones and the waltz. Parlour games were also played such as musical parcels and crazy musical chairs. The Americans won the crazy musical chairs game, but only by a point!

The report describes several touching moments which occurred during the party:

“One very touching moment occurred when an American asked if his wife’s favourite song might be sung as he was afraid he might not hear her sing it again (he was suffering from a very serious lung wound).”³⁵

Another was when an American soldier said,

“please ask the mothers to give us parties like this-there are no parties at the front line, and the front line horrors are with us. This helps us to remember the joys of home and the liberty we are fighting for. God bless you all mothers, for we are sometimes lonely. We are so far from home and mother.”³⁶

1945 would also bring some sadness to the members of WVS Bristol, as their oldest serving WVS Housewife, Miss Bishop, died aged 84. Also, one of the most active workers, Mrs Gardiner passed away. She ran a very successful working party which was to be carried on indefinitely in memory of her.

1945 was to signal the end to the canteens in Bristol. In March 1945 the central clinic canteen was taken over by the clinic staff. This was the last of the large Civil Defence Canteens and closed a chapter on the history of WVS in Bristol. By April 1945 WVS were only running one large services canteen at Southmead, one clinic canteen and one small fleet of mobiles which were mainly assisting with feeding the returned prisoners of war.

In May 1945 Southmead Hospital Canteen closed for business. It was the last of the static canteens and had been active since 1939 on the request of Dr Parry. Closing the canteen saw an end to one of WVS Bristol’s largest

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³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

undertakings of the war. A farewell party was organised for the 300 WVS members who had helped run this canteen during the war.

The mobile canteens however, continued to serve the community and in September 1945 they were regularly servicing 300-400 troops four times weekly, from College Green. In October 1945 Mrs Lennard the organiser for the mobile service to Avonmouth docks, records that:

*“£4,000 profit was made and given to charities, 2,000,000 hot beverages were served from mobiles and nearly 1,700,000 main meals. 104 WVS helpers were attached to this service, 60 continuously during the war and 10 giving over 22 hours weekly.”*³⁷

A quote taken from a letter received from the Secretary of the Port of Bristol Authority stated that:

*“Everyone on the Docks is going to remember the work of the WVS as the silver lining of some very dark clouds”.*³⁸

In addition to dock workers, the mobile canteens frequently served hospital ships, troop ships and disembarking troops from USA and Canada.

In September the Work parties were informed that their work was to cease once all materials in hand had been cleared. By this time they would have returned over 8,000 lbs of completed garments and collected nearly £500 for the organisation.³⁹ However, by December 1945 it was decided that a room at the WVS office could be made available to the members from work parties who wish to continue to work together. From then on they met twice weekly and would do any useful work that came to hand.

On 28th November 1945 Lady Reading made her last wartime visit to Bristol and addressed the WVS at the Victoria Rooms. She spoke to about 1,000 members and it was recorded that her “inspiring words have settled all doubts as to whether work for WVS was still essential to the national interest”.⁴⁰ Mrs Thomas held a Luncheon Party to which many of the original members were invited and were delighted to get the opportunity to meet the chairman so informally.

Our final Narrative Report for Bristol during the war years describes the preparation being made for Christmas celebrations. The American Junior Red

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³⁷ WRVS/NR/R7/1945-CB/BRI/October

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ WRVS/NR/R7/1945-CB/BRI/September

⁴⁰ WRVS/NR/R7/1945-CB/BRI/November

Cross sent toys over and these were distributed to nurseries, nursery schools and clinics. Sweets were sent to the Dean for the Cathedral Christmas tree and the delayed sweets from Argentine were distributed to crippled and orphan children in the care of the health authority.

In conclusion, the years of war proved that it was possible for women to serve their community in an 'operational and disciplined way' ⁴¹proving that 'people will always work for a common cause if they understand how the small part they are playing contributes to the whole'. ⁴² Collectively these women understood their role in relation to the national war effort. There were no ranks in WVS and all members worked on an equal footing and in the same uniform, side by side. The WVS of Bristol battled against the enemy and stood as a friendly and supportive influence amongst so much terror and uncertainty.

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⁴¹ WVS, op.cit., 10.

⁴² Ibid.

APPENDICES

PICTURES HELD IN THE COLLECTION:

WRVS/HQ/P/F/MOBC014 (1939-1945) Copyright (M W Dunscombe Ltd, Bristol.)

Mobile canteen, Bristol

Description: A large group of women and young children stand in rows, posing for the camera, to the right of a mobile canteen, labelled 'WVS NEW SOUTH WALES TO BRITAIN', which is parked in a field probably near Bristol. The mobile canteen is providing tea and chocolate to bombed out families. Two WVS members stand in the back of the canteen, the doors wide open, and there are two tents, one a large marquee, in the background.

WRVS/HQ/P/SWH/CANC001 (1939-1945) Copyright (Unknown)

WVS runs a services canteen in South mead

Description: Five WVS members are serving at a services welfare canteen in South mead, Bristol. In the background the five WVS members are standing behind a serving counter serving various snacks and drinks. On the left of the counter there are a number of service personnel including four nurses and two soldiers, the one in the foreground is a sergeant. On the counter top is a variety of cakes and snacks items including a vase of flowers.

AIR RAID TIME LINE⁴³

- Between 24th Nov 1940 - 11th Apr 1941
- 2nd November 1940 - 5,000 incendiary and 10,000 high explosive bombs were dropped on the old city.
- 24th November 1940: 148 Luftflotte 3 bombers left Germany to bomb Bristol: the attack started at 6.30pm with waves of 2 or 3 bombers passing over Bristol dropping some 12,000 incendiary bombs and 160 tons of high-explosive bombs.
- 3 – 4th January 1941: Bristol had its longest raid lasting 12 hours; during this raid the Luftwaffe dropped their biggest bomb on the city. It was nicknamed "Satan" and did not explode.
- The infamous good Friday air raid: caused further damage to the centre of the city, Knowle, Hotwells, Cotham and Filton, and caused the permanent closure of the Bristol Tramways.
- The last raid on Bristol was on 15th May 1944

⁴³ *Bristol Blitzed Overview, Bristol Blitzed* [Online]. Available at: www.bristolblitzed.org (11 July 2012).

REFERENCES

Bristol Record Office also holds records on the work of the WVS (See Record description below)

Level	Collection
RefNo	
Title	Records relating to the Women's Voluntary Service Housewives' Service
Description	Possibly collected by or belonging to Mrs. Ida Hayward History/description of collection: The WVS operated a "Steady Heads" and first-aider scheme as part of the voluntary services in World War Two. This collection contains printed material on national topics; the local records relate to the Bishop Road / Kings Drive area of Bishopston, Bristol Contents Description Classification Service Records 40830 / S Circulars & Memoranda 40830 / C Printed Material 40830 / P Miscellaneous 40830 / X

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Narrative Reports: Dec 1940-Jan 1941, March-April 1941, May-June 1941, July, August, September, October, November

WRVS/HQ/NR R7/1942:

Narrative Reports Jan-Feb, May-Aug, Oct-Nov

Box 853 (1943):

Clothing Depot Reports October, November, December 1943

Narrative Reports Jan – Oct

Box 854 (1944-1945):

Narrative Reports: January-December 1944

Quarter Reports: December 1943 –March 1944, March- June 1944, June-September 1944

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