

THE ORIGINS OF MEALS ON WHEELS

ROYAL VOLUNTARY SERVICE HERITAGE COLLECTION

The first use of the phrase 'Meals on Wheels' in a WVS document in the WRVS archive, is from a narrative report from Welwyn Garden City in December 1943 ¹, but an earlier printing of the phrase appears in the Welwyn Times of October 28 1943.

"...a letter had been received from Lady Anguin, local centre organiser of the WVS, stating that last winter the WVS received several enquiries as to whether some sort of "meals on wheels" service could be organised for the aged and infirm people in the town who were experiencing a difficult time owing to the fact that the able and stronger people who had assisted them were now performing wartime duties." ²

It was thus on either Friday 3 or Tuesday 7 December that the first Meals on Wheels were delivered in Welwyn Garden City. ³ In Welwyn the meals were provided by British Restaurants ⁴ at a cost of 6d per meal ⁵ and then initially delivered by WVS members and served using a small car. ⁶ By November 1944 WVS members were delivering 213 meals a month, ⁷ on two days every week. ⁸ A second scheme was started in the neighbouring town of Letchworth shortly after November 1944. ⁹

According to Graves the delivery of meals had started as a reaction to the 1943 Influenza epidemic, providing meals for the elderly and the sick, ¹⁰ this though was carried on as it was a "Job well worth doing because it partly fills a badly felt need". ¹¹

A letter to Sir George Wilkinson, from the vice-chairman, Miss Maxse, dated 6 June 1947, suggests the 'Meals on Wheels' service was inaugurated in the autumn of

¹ 348 / Hertfordshire 1943 / Narrative report Welwyn Garden City Dec 1943.

² 1085/7 The Welwyn Times Thursday October 28, 1943.

³ The date of the first delivery is unsure as it is not reported in the Welwyn Times, but the issue of 2 December notes "...it was hoped very shortly to be inaugurated in the town." And the issue of 9 December states "...the service has now been commenced..."

⁴ 348 / Hertfordshire 1943 / Narrative report Welwyn Garden City Dec 1943

⁵ 348 / Hertfordshire 1944 / Report on Meals on Wheels June 14 1944

⁶ 348 / Hertfordshire 1943 / Narrative report Welwyn Garden City Dec 1943

⁷ 348 / Hertfordshire 1944 / Narrative report Welwyn Garden City November 1944

⁸ 348 / Hertfordshire 1944 / Report on Meals on Wheels June 14 1944.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Graves, C. 1948. Women In Green: The story of the W.V.S. in wartime. William Heinmen Ltd. London p178

¹¹ 348 / Hertfordshire 1944 / Report on Meals on Wheels June 14 1944

1945, ¹²and it seems likely that WVS used Welwyn and Letchworth as a test prior to the official start of the service in 1945. By June 1947 38 centres were “serving meals to old people” and there were “eleven centres where WVS are assisting other organisations to carry out similar schemes”. ¹³

The letter also notes:

“Although meals can be obtained from the British Restaurant, Invalid Kitchen, or in some cases, through the educational authorities serving school meals. In some instances, the meals are cooked by WVS in kitchens equipped by WVS” ¹⁴

By 1956 one million meals a year were being delivered in 320 areas and by 1962 four million meals were being served in 790 areas. ¹⁵ Meals on Wheels was, according to Lady Reading, “Given its name over lunch at her home by her driver.”¹⁶

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¹² 36/Meals-on-wheels 1946-56/6 June 1947/1

¹³ bid

¹⁴ ibid

¹⁵ WVS. 1963. Report on 25 Years Work. HMSO p47

¹⁶ bid