

## **Women in the Great War**

The speakers at the March meeting of the Local History Group were David Humberston (the Chairman of the Leicestershire and Rutland Branch of the Western Front Association) and his partner Valerie.

The Great War of 1914-1918 did not merely change the political geography of Europe and beyond: it changed British Society and the role that women played within it. The shortages of both men and weapons were addressed by the establishment of the Ministry of Munitions in 1915 and the introduction of conscription the following year. These created opportunities for ladies from across the spectrum of British society to step into the shoes of their absent menfolk and serve their King and Country.

Many wealthy families were in difficulty due to the war, and large country houses were converted into hospitals and convalescent homes staffed by women who joined the Red Cross. The First Aid Nursing Yeomanry or FANY (established in 1907), provided their ladies with a khaki uniform, and members were awarded 45 gallantry medals for nursing and ambulance driving in France and Belgium. Women's military groups were also created such as WRAC, WRNS and WRAF, whilst the WI ('imported' from Canada in 1915) provided practical and moral support on the home front.

The shortage of menfolk meant that women took on many unfamiliar roles including farming, delivering coal, tram driving and as policewomen. The Land Army was established in 1917 which meant for many women a change from skirts to breeches. Hundreds of thousands worked in munition factories – they were called 'canary girls' because their skin became yellow from handling TNT. These factories were dangerous places to work, and several major explosions happened with fatalities. One was at the Barnbow factory near Leeds when 35 women were killed, and a memorial still exists to 'The Barnbow Lassies'. Due to censorship the full details of the explosion were not made public until 1920. At some factories the "Munionettes" started women's football teams to raise funds for injured servicemen. These existed until 1921 when the FA banned women from playing football.

## **Women who made history**

Edith Cavell was a British nurse celebrated for treating wounded soldiers from both sides without discrimination, and for helping some 200 Allied soldiers escape back to their homeland. The night before her execution by

firing squad in October 1915 she said “patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone”.

Louise de Bettignies (alias Alice Dubois), operated an intelligence network in Lille passing information to Britain. On one occasion she used lemon juice as invisible ink to write messages on her petticoat from the local citizens to their families elsewhere in France. She was arrested in October 1915 and sentenced to death for spying but this was commuted to life imprisonment in Cologne. A defiant lady, she organised a strike amongst the prisoners refusing to make munitions for the German army. She died in prison after unsuccessful surgery for sepsis.

Mata Hari (whose real name was Margaretha McLeod) was an exotic dancer from Paris who was found guilty of spying by French Intelligence and executed by firing squad on 15 November 1917.

Marie Curie did much to help her native Poland, and developed mobile X-Ray units, called ‘Petit Curies’ She offered her Nobel prize medals to be melted down to help the war effort but was declined.

Elsie Knocker and Mairi Chisholm were two keen lady motorcyclists who set up a first aid post 50 yds from the Belgian front line. They drove ambulances that they had managed to acquire in England to take wounded soldiers to hospitals and saved many lives. They received both British and Belgian decorations for gallantry and a statue to them is by the Hotel Ariane in Ypres. There is a most interesting book about them written by Diane Atkinson called ‘Elsie and Mairi go to War’.

David organises a coach tour to Ypres each year from 9<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> November, and if you would like to join him he can be contacted on [foft@live.co.uk](mailto:foft@live.co.uk)

Stuart Tyler and Roger Berkeley

Local History Group