Women in World War I: the Welsh Experience

'Menywod yn y Rhyfel Byd Cyntaf: Y Profiad Cymreig'

'People are always asking me what my father did during the War, but no one has ever asked me about my mother'.

The Women’s Archive of Wales was established in 1997 with two aims:

To identify and preserve the sources relevant to the history of women in Wales, and
To raise awareness of the history of women in Wales.

Our key aim is to discover and preserve the evidence of lives and experiences of women in Wales, and to make this history accessible to all. The Archive organises conferences and events to present the history of women in Wales, working on its own (with an annual conference and occasional day schools and other events), and in collaboration with organisations such as Llafur, The People’s Collection and the Women’s History Network.
Background to the Project

The Women’s Archive has run two successful Heritage Lottery Funded projects, the Roadshow project 2008 – 2009, and Voices from the Factory Floor 2013 – 15. Both attracted a great deal of attention, and resulted in the collection and recording of important areas of women’s history in Wales.

With the approach of the commemoration of the First World War, the Archive was anxious to do work on women in Wales 1914 to 1919. The actual impetus for the form of the project came when we looked at the website Cymru 1914 which includes 551 photographic records from public collections in Wales ‘revealing the often hidden history of the First World War as it impacted all aspects of Welsh life, language and culture’, but including only around twenty images of women, all of whom were with a husband, sweetheart, father or son. The history of women during the War clearly needed revealing!

A small group of members of the WAW Committee met on 22nd May 2014 to discuss the way forward. This consisted of Jenny Sabine, Caroline Fairclough and Professor Deirdre Beddoe. The core group was later joined by Catrin Stevens. The group felt that the focus should be on older people who still have memories of the generation who were alive during the war. It was hoped that we could retrieve both oral accounts and archive material that could be scanned and preserved, and made accessible to all. The work was to be carried out by volunteer members of the Women’s Archive of Wales who are dispersed throughout the country.

The aims of the project were:

- There will be a far wider understanding of the importance of women’s activities during WWI and the impact of the war on their lives.
- Older peoples’ memories will be seen to be of importance and worthy of recording.
- The experiences of women from minority groups, for example in the port cities of Cardiff and Swansea, will be explored.
- The significance of the ephemera of WWI - photographs, letters and other documents - will be demonstrated. These materials will be preserved in a digital archive accessible to all.
- An important outcome of the project will be the development of a digital archive, linked to but independent from the existing AMC/WAW website: [http://www.womensarchivewales.org](http://www.womensarchivewales.org). This will also be linked to Cymru’n Cofio. The fully bilingual website will be maintained by AMC/WAW, and will comply with the conditions of HLF.
- To use materials acquired to develop bilingual teaching materials for schools in conjunction with university teacher-training departments.
- To prepare an exhibition for display 2016/17

An application for financial support was made to the Heritage Lottery Fund in the autumn of 2014 and we were awarded a grant of £8000 in March 2015. This was supplemented by a donation of £300 from the Women’s Archive of Wales.

This composite strip of women’s faces was used in publicity for the project.
The Project

Members of the Women’s Archive were encouraged, in both Newsletter articles and by regular emails, to engage in the project. Volunteers emerged, particularly in North West Wales where a small group was formed. Regular emails to members resulted in some materials and stories, for which we are very grateful. One London member wrote about the project in the London Welsh Newsletter which helped promote the work. A core group of volunteer members, about five in number, put in a great many hours of time, whilst others provided stories and images of members of their families.

Initially progress in engaging with participants was very slow. A roadshow in Abergavenny in June, held jointly with the museum and well promoted locally produced only three expressions of interest, of which only one could be followed up. Presentations at groups such as the U3A and history societies in the North and the South again aroused interest but little else. However one or two occasions produced some very interesting conversations. One elderly woman’s mother had joined the WAAC (underage) in 1918. She had kept a quantity of material relating to her mother. This is now on the website. She said, with some emotion, ‘People are always asking me what my father did during the War, but no one has ever asked me about my mother’. Overlap with a participant in another recent HLF funded project, ‘Voices from the Factory Floor, produced photographs, letters and other documents, and much family information from a woman living in Pontypool. From a slow start the project has snowballed, with new information still coming in, and a backlog of stories and items waiting to be put on the website.

Material collected during the Roadshow project of 2008 – 9 has also been incorporated into the collection, as have had individual items donated to the Archive.

As time went on, it became obvious that there was a great deal of information already in the public domain, but scattered through many websites and fora. It was decided that if the story of women in Wales 1914 – 1919 was to be told fully, we needed to include such material. It was sometimes possible to sort out more fully the life stories of some women who moved around Wales and into England and abroad. The archive of the British Red Cross, for example held digitisations of the record cards of many VADs which proved extremely useful in tracing careers. Coverage of the whole of Wales has remained patchy though, despite the best efforts of north Wales members. We have, for example, no records of any of the hundreds of women who worked in
munitions at the National Explosives Factory, Queensferry. It is hoped that these will still emerge. We will be adding to the website until at least 1919, so there is still time.

**War Memorials**

For the past few years members of the Archive have been collecting records of women’s names on War Memorials, and keeping a database. This began after hearing reports of surprise that a woman’s name had found its way onto a public monument. The collection of War memorials, War Graves and other monuments has now been incorporated into the project. Currently memorials to around 50 women’s are to be found on the website.

We have also been very fortunate in having access to Dr Gethin Matthews’s work on Rolls of Honour in chapels and churches, which he has shared with the project; these too are being included on the site.

**Website**

[Image of the Women, Wales and War website]

www.womenandwar.wales or www.menywodarhyfel.cymru

As our chief objective was to uncover or recover the lives of women who lived, and sometimes died, during WWI we were delighted to be able to share these lives on our website Women, Wales and War. This was built by Nigel Callaghan of Technoleg Taliesin, near Machynlleth and went live at the end of May 2016. At that time there were 125 women recorded on the site. This number has grown, by the end of September, to nearly 180, and there are many more names to add, as well as additional material to add to existing entries. It is extremely easy to add to the site, and it is also
extremely easy to search it by occupation, name, place of birth or cause of death. The old Welsh county names have been used throughout, as it is otherwise difficult to match some records.

Posters

The design of the project originally called for high expenditure on postage. As the project developed, it became clear that this was not necessary. Instead, with the permission of HLF, we had designed a series of four posters which were sent to every secondary school in Wales. In this way we have succeeded in informing secondary schoolchildren throughout Wales about women’s contributions to the First World War. The project leader has also been invited to speak to pupils about the project and its significance. Teachers have expressed their gratitude for these new resources and welcomed the fact that they provide a different interpretation of the war. The posters, which are in Welsh or English, were designed by Jonathan Morris of Height studios.

These posters are available to download for free from the Resources section of the website: (www.womenandwar.wales / www.menywodarhyfel/cymru).

Training

Our HLF grant enabled us to purchase a video camera to support our taking of oral histories. This in its turn required training, and two full day sessions were held, the trainer being bilingual film and documentary maker Catrin Edwards of Cardiff. Sessions were held at Bangor University for north Wales participants, and Gwent Archives, Ebbw Vale for the south. These were valuable sessions in skilling, upskilling and reskilling, and all the participants found the courses very useful.

Future Plans

Although the HLF funded aspect of the project is now complete, the project itself has by no means come to an end, and some of our aims for the project have not yet been met.

As has already been outlined, we intend to continue to collect actively for the project until at least 2019. A number of short- and long-term activities are planned.

- In November 2016 there will be short ceremonies held in north-west, north-east, south-west and south-east Wales to remember the women named on War Memorials. Each will be led by a member of AMC/WAW, and it is hoped that local primary school children will attend, as well as members who live in the area. This is a joint project with Living Memory, a project supported by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.
- During 2017 the project will be included in an exhibition Monmouthshire Women Making Change at Abergavenny, then, we hope, touring Wales in a slightly reduced form.
- One of the outcomes of our HLF grant was to be the sharing of material that we have acquired with the People’s Collection Wales, (who have been very helpful during the last
year). This has not yet been achieved, but will be in the near future, thus enabling us to promote our collections more widely.

- We had hoped to collect some memories from women from minority ethnic groups, especially the port cities of Newport, Swansea and Cardiff. We did not achieve this during the course of the grant period, but we are still hoping to work with these groups, and also to explore the experiences of ‘enemy aliens’ or the wives of aliens.
- Our posters for secondary schools are the first step into working with and for schools. We plan to work with teacher trainers to develop more teaching material for schools.
- We plan to ensure the preservation of all the stories and materials collected in this project by saving the whole collection in cloud storage. We have collected considerably more than can be shown on the website. It is currently saved on a dedicated hard-drive, but these have only a limited life.
- And ... the project was called Women, Wales and War for a purpose. We will reach the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II in 2019. We already have some material in our collections, and a number of records of memorials and monuments. We intend in the future to extend the range of the website to include 1939 – 1945.

Acknowledgements

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We could not have achieved our ambitions without the help of members of the Archive, who have between them put in hundreds of hours of work. And we must also thanks all those, whether they are members of AMC/WAW or not, who provided images and information for the project. Particular thanks must go to Dr Gethin Matthews of Swansea University for sharing material, Dahlia Harrison for sharing her research on Alice Meldrum, and the late Sue Light for her amazing websites and general help, and for allowing us to use her photograph of Gertrude Madley.