

The Women of Hinckley and the First World War

John Martin and Robert King

This paper constitutes a pioneering case study of the wartime experiences of three different groups of women from Hinckley and the surrounding villages. The first part of the study examines the effects of the war on the role, status and standing of Hinckley's influential women through their wartime charitable efforts on behalf of the underprivileged and needy women in the town. The second part concentrates on the effects of the war on the workplace roles, opportunities and status of the town's wage-earning women focussing on those employed in one particular sector of the town's wartime industries - the hosiery trade. Hinckley was different from many other towns in that it had a long history of women being employed in the hosiery industry prior to 1914.

Introduction

At the outbreak of war in 1914, a Hinckley and district woman's influence in the town's civic affairs was determined mainly by birth or by marriage into the entrepreneurial or professional classes, for example, the Atkins' in hosiery manufacture; the Hawley's in fabric dying, and the Pilgrim's in the legal profession. During the First World War this group of influential women can be seen to be operating chiefly through two largely female-run relief organisations: the Hinckley & District Women's War Relief Fund and the Hinckley Soldiers' & Sailors' Families Association, the main aim of both organisations being to assist the underprivileged women of Hinckley who found themselves in straitened circumstances, often through no fault of their own. Those needing help typically consisted of pre-natal and nursing mothers, and women who were suffering hardship through loss of immediate income by their men being recalled as military reservists or territorials upon the declaration of war. Bilton comments that their situation was exacerbated by the slow payment of separation allowances (1), a point reinforced by Wilson (2), and by the Hinckley Soldiers' and Sailors' Families Association post-war report. (3) Additionally, elderly parents and widowed mothers did not receive a state pension or subsidy until November 1915 with the adoption of the Naval and Military War Pensions Act which catered for all servicemen's dependants.(4) The District Relief Committee [DRC] (5), was a system established to implement charitable relief and commercial activities at both national and local levels. The DRC drew upon the expertise of local influential people such as

"I now take the pleasure of thanking you and all the ladies of the fund for the kind parcel that came to hand on the 9th inst., of this month. It is a pleasure to know that although I have been a long time away from my native town I am not forgotten.

It is a pity that so many of the brave boys from the district have passed away, or maimed for life, but it was for a just cause, but we can only hope for the best, and the sooner peace is declared the better for all concerned."

"I have just received the parcel of clothing. I hardly know how to thank you for all the nice warm things which I can assure you are more than welcome. It cheers one up to know that someone is thinking of us and, as a reward for the noble work which the ladies of England are doing we shall not rest until these "Huns" have been paid back in their own coin, so that they will never again be a menace to the fair homes of Britain."

"Pleased to say the parcel reached me safely and in good condition. I send to you and the Womens' Relief Fund my heartiest thanks and best wishes."

"The supply of fresh vegetables to the forces employed on the arduous and highly important work of minesweeping would be of the greatest benefit to their health and morale and I feel sure would be greatly appreciated by them." In grateful recognition and earnest appreciation of your generous services for the comfort and welfare of our gallant Sailors during the great War. 1914-1919

Extracts from letters of appreciation to the women of Hinckley from soldiers, sailors, prisoners of war and the Admiralty. (Reproduced by permission of the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland.)

industrial owners and politicians and their wives and relatives, such as Mrs Hawley and Mrs Pilgrim. (6)

Hinckley & District Women's War Relief Fund

This is the best documented example of an independent decision-making body, although it did also operate under the umbrella of the DRC. The rapid implementation of this relief fund was impressive. A public meeting was held in the Council Chamber on the 7th August 1914 where it was decided to establish a charitable fund based in Hinckley and the surrounding villages, this relief being put into action by the Hinckley women just four days after the declaration of war. They did not join the 'war over by Christmas' faction.

The post-war report comments that 'this Committee continued to work right through the War and, from its inauguration in August 1914, up to October 1919, the sum of

£1,314 16s. 4d. was raised, and £1,076 0s. 11d. was expended in the provision and distribution of articles. (7) The amounts of comforts and clothing dispatched by the Committee demonstrate the sheer industry and extent of their efforts. Approximately 1,740 parcels containing various articles of clothing were sent to the fighting forces, of which 870 were acknowledged. (8) The Relief Fund also raised the money to pay for the raw materials needed to manufacture the items. As a final act in October 1919, the women of the Relief Fund donated £238 15s. 5d. to be given at Christmas to the most needy wounded soldiers and sailors. An additional sum of £26 6s. 11d. was given to the Hinckley War Memorial Fund.

Although residing in land-locked Leicestershire, the Hinckley & District Women's War Relief Fund made strenuous efforts to support the Royal Navy. On Trafalgar Day 1915, a large consignment of fruit, vegetables, sweets and cakes was donated. The money collected by the Hinckley Fund was surpassed only by the Prince of Wales' Relief Fund and the Y.M.C.A. Hut Fund, both nationally-led charities. This benevolence was underlined in December 1916 when additional efforts were made to provide Christmas fare for the fleet when 'Christmas Puddings, Cakes, Biscuits, Chocolates, Mince Pies, Toffee, tins of Pears and Sherbet, Fruit and Vegetables, were dispatched in specially made packing cases lined with holly'. (9)

Hinckley Soldiers' & Sailors' Families Association

The Hinckley Soldiers' & Sailors' Families Association's post-war report gives an immediate indication of problems for the women of reservists called to the colours. It states that, 'Wives of reservists called up on August 4th were found to be without money, bewildered and helpless, those of Territorial's and the newly enlisted were soon to be in the same condition, financial help for families of Soldiers and Sailors had to be disbursed at once. (10) The words 'rapid' and 'speedily' are frequently mentioned in the archives of the Association. (11)

Mrs Cope of the Cope family of Osbaston Hall, inaugurated the Hinckley Branch of the Soldiers' & Sailors' Families Association. It quickly appointed an Hon. Secretary and Hon. Treasurer, with work commencing on the 15th August 1914. The Hinckley Urban District Council found the Association an office in the Council House, and a Visiting Committee of women was set up by the



Castle Street, Hinckley, was the town's main shopping area during the First World War and is still easily recognisable today. (From the private collection of R. D. King.)

19th August, and within just 14 days after the declaration of war, the Association had obtained office and administration facilities necessary to investigate and process all incoming claims. The Visiting Committee contained such prominent family names as Atkins, Pilgrim, Bott, Aucott and Emery. The Visitors operated on a zonal basis with each person being responsible for their own area of the town. These districts eventually numbered twenty, with the Visiting Committee reaching a maximum number of twenty-eight members.

The distribution of money and grants to the needy from The Hinckley Soldiers' & Sailors' Families Association, although solely at the discretion of the District Relief Committee, was based on the Visiting Committee reports. Assistance was paid from the outbreak of the war throughout the conflict. The principles on which the money was distributed were:

1. Advances made on account for delayed Separation Allowances and Pensions.
2. Grants in kind, by orders on trades people.
3. Direct financial assistance, including funeral expenses, maternity grants, rent allowances and, particularly, separation allowances.

The wives of army reservists and Territorial soldiers who had been recalled to the colours on the outbreak of war found themselves in a parlous situation. Marwick's all-embracing general theory that the war swept away outmoded national class distinctions and coincidentally promoted the emancipation of women, fails to fully appreciate that the process of such a change would cause suffering to those most affected in the first instance. The Hinckley Association's post-war report was particularly scathing of the Government, condemning as a 'pittance' the pre-war rate of separation allowance of 7s.7d. a week for a wife with ½d. a week for each dependant child. (12) These rates were amended during the War with the Executive Committee of the National Relief Fund raising the allowance from 11s.1d. per week, with 1s.9d. for each child, to 12s.6d. per week,

with 2s. for each child. (13) The Government, with a slight increase in the child allowance, adopted these figures 1st October 1914. (14)

Over three thousand letters were written during wartime in pursuit of remedial action. (15) After the Armistice the results were analysed to form an Association archive and to act as a record of the hard work undertaken by the Association's Visiting

Committee. The analysis also underlined the fact that the Government went to war unprepared, with only a peacetime social relief structure. A consequence of this was that serving men and their dependants were denied immediate financial assistance when men were killed, wounded or taken prisoner. The activities of the Visiting Committee thus assumed an increasing importance as local efforts strove to make up for the shortfall in central government planning.

The Association also assisted in tracing enlisted men, and in instituting enquiries into the difficult task of finding missing and wounded soldiers, maintaining a register of soldiers' and sailors' wives and dependants which was available for public scrutiny in the Committee Room at the Council House. The Committee Room became not only the centre for the Association's work, but also an unofficial enquiry and help bureau. This was particularly appreciated by the families of serving men, and as the war progressed, by the bereaved relatives of the 387 serving men who lost their lives. (16) The Association was also instrumental in providing £121 obtained from the Royal Patriotic Fund, for payment to the wives and dependants of servicemen killed in action. Furthermore, it arranged for relatives to be granted permits for visits to convalescent hospitals and undertook correspondence with serving soldiers and the War Office to resolve personal problems. Queries from the Army authorities were answered, and correspondence entered into with army paymasters regarding allowances and the lodging of appeals against decisions already made. For many, the War Office Regulation Forms were 'almost unintelligible to the average dependent' (17), and that the assistance of someone who knew the system was very beneficial. Such were the talents and abilities of Association members like Mrs Shirley Atkins, and the two Misses Aucott (daughters of the hosiery owner Thomas Aucott) who served on the Visiting Committee.

With reference to the government's role, Wilson suggests that the central authorities were forced to take over charitable relief when the middle and upper classes found it difficult to maintain their levels of financial support. (18) He does not however comment on the efforts of organisations such as at Hinckley that assisted the claims of their fellow townspeople for items such as state pensions. One possible explanation for this situation is that the Hinckley women were a considerable annoyance to the military authorities in their continuing demands for improved pensions for local military personnel and their dependants. (19) Another

Visiting Committee.	
✓ Mrs. Shirley Atkins	Miss Ismay
✓ Miss Aucott	Mrs. Littler ✓
✓ Miss K. Aucott	Miss Mason ✓
✓ Mrs. Ball	Mrs. Orchard ✓
✓ Mrs. W. E. Ball	Miss M. A. Pilgrim
✓ Mrs. G. Bott	Miss Powers ✓
✓ Miss Bott	Mrs. Reeve ✓
Mrs. Crump	Mrs. Vere Smith
✓ Mrs. H. Davis	Mrs. Stanley ✓
Mrs. Dudley	Mrs. Stevenson ✓
Miss Emery	Mrs. P. Taylor.
✓ Miss Hincks	
Retired Members—Miss Atkins, Mrs. Griffiths, Mrs. W. Herbert, ✓	
Miss G. Pickering, Miss Bedford.	

Names of the Visiting Committee of the Hinckley Soldiers' & Sailors' Families Association. (Reproduced by permission of the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland.)

explanation would be to cast doubt on the efficiency of the military records office in failing to cope with the huge expansion of the wartime army. A further consideration, even allowing for the way the women of Hinckley engaged in a struggle with various military departments, was the financial saving they made for the state - while it is too sweeping a statement to maintain that the Association did all the administration for the military, there is no doubt that their efforts saved precious government resources at a time of ever increasing demands.

One previously unimagined financial undertaking by the Hinckley Association was to become the repository for people's financial savings in the period before 'War Savings Certificates' were issued. (20) Members of the Association assisted the servicemen's dependants by visiting their homes during periods of sickness, arranging for funerals in the absence of the husband or father, and looking after servicemen's children who had been deserted by their mothers. They were also active in finding employment and housing for dependants. (21) In December 1914, and before the advent of the increased Separation Allowance issued by the Army Council, every child was issued with an article, such as warm clothing, donated by the people of Hinckley, including sixty-five garments gifted by the United States of America. A supply of warm clothing was stockpiled by the Visiting Committee for deserving cases, entirely decided upon by the women Visitors' reports. (22) Records show the Association cared for seventy-two maternity cases before the opening of Hinckley's Child Welfare Centre. The children received medical aid provided by the Visiting Committee, and during the measles epidemic of 1915, 145 were visited daily. (23) Regular nursing visits, milk, eggs and beef tea were also provided. This exceeded the standard view of charitable relief which was typically portrayed as the raising of money and visiting the sick. Soldiers' dependants also had entertainment provided for them by the Association. At Christmas 1914 a party was held for three hundred wives and children, with the money being provided by various collections. A Tipperary or Social Club met weekly between 1914 and 1915 at the Mission Room, loaned by Canon Hurrell, which was almost entirely self-supporting. At Christmas 1915 Mr and Mrs Hawley provided a Christmas tree, tea and gifts for some 1,700 soldiers' wives, mothers and children at the local skating rink.

The Underprivileged Women of Hinckley

There were also the women of Hinckley who constituted an underprivileged class and who were the main recipients of

assistance from the more affluent women’s charitable wartime organisations. Typically, these poorer women were drawn from war widows who could not work due to child-minding, those awaiting the payment of state pensions, the infirm and the elderly. A. S. Atkins compiled a register of 316 such women along with their addresses. (24) As well as War widows, Atkins’ list included widowed mothers who had also lost their sons, and with them, their chief means of support. Comparing the 1901 Census which recorded 5,049 females residing in Hinckley with Atkins’ figures, this indicates that approximately 6% of townswomen were likely to have been receiving some form of charitable relief during the war. The details contained in the list describe the subsidies given for groceries and fuel bills; but with no account of other payments such as war pensions granted by either the state or the District Relief Committee.

The surviving reports filed by the Association’s Visitors contained information on each woman’s employment, on members of their family, and the regiment in which any males of the household were serving. (25) For example, Miss Hincks who visited a Mrs Sarah Bailey, judged the claimant to be a, ‘*very deserving case*’, and accordingly awarded her 5s.6d. per week for groceries. (26). A Mrs Herbert was visited by Miss Bedford as her case number 42, her report containing information about a son adopted in 1902 and who was serving with the 5th Battalion D Company, the Leicestershire Regiment. The son had supported the home as the father was unable to work and the mother nursed her baby who was often ill. The mother also suffers from ‘a very bad leg’. The family did not pay a rent but paid an (unspecified) mortgage. The decision taken by the DRC was that she was a genuine case for financial assistance and she was awarded an initial payment of 2s. per week for groceries for two weeks followed by 5s. per week for the next eight weeks. (27) Although this particular register only gives up to the first ten weeks of payment, it does demonstrate a pattern of careful investigation and implementation. There are no surviving recorded instances of the rejection of a claimant, or of an appeal against such a rejection. Occasionally the committee advised to give relief when necessary but not money.

The foregoing examples indicate the near total authority on the part of the members of the visiting sub-committee – reflections on the expectations of their social standing and ‘right’ to decide on behalf of fellow citizens in the absence of government aid. In this they were no different to their male counterparts on the District Relief Committee.

Working Class Women in Hinckley’s Hosiery Industry and Changes in Women’s Employment during World War One

As noted above, Hinckley was unusual in that pre-war it already had a substantial female population employed in the town’s hosiery industry. Most worked as shop-floor

operatives, with men doing the heavier jobs. Some women workers would have been unmarried, others already widows at the outbreak of war, and those who were married and were to some extent left to fend for themselves and their children when their men went off to war.

Nationally, the changing roles of women during wartime was considerably impacted upon by the Munitions of War Act 1915. In the pre-war era De Groot contends most women were tied to the ‘traditional female employment’ typified by him as domestic service, food processing, millinery and light industry. (28) Bilton argues that it was the First World War’s influence that enabled women to progress from suffragette protesters to accepted members of a national workforce. Whilst the number of women nationally employed in the munitions industry rose from 212,000 in 1914 to 947,000 in 1918, the number working in the textile industry fell from 863,000 to 818,000, and in the clothing industry from 612,000 to 556,000. The munitions industry gained substantially from those women employed in domestic service, whose numbers fell from 1,658,000 in 1914 to 1,250,000 in 1918. (29) An overview of the changes to women’s employment is given below. The Act was also seen to encompass ‘the idea that the interests of the state and the community should take priority over the interests of the individuals’. (30) There were four munitions factories in wartime Hinckley - Moore Bros. on Wood Street and Albert Road, W. K. Flavell also on Wood Street, Peacock and Waller’s at the Alma Works. These four were part of a consortium of munitions factories in the East Midlands. (31)

Wilson writes that prior to 1914 women had not gained acceptance within the realms of the heavier industries, largely due to laws that prohibited them undertaking certain industrial work. (32) Thomason, an Industrial Relations commentator, maintains that, ironically early legislation, which is always grouped under the generic title of the Truck and Factory Acts 1831-1940, had been enacted to protect women and children from unscrupulous owners, and

Type of employment	Number of Women 1914	Employed 1918	% of 1914 total
Munitions	212,000	947,000	446
Textiles	863,000	818,000	95
Clothing	612,000	556,000	91
Other Industries	452,000	451,000	99
Transport	18,000	117,000	640
Agriculture	190,000	228,000	120
Commerce	505,000	934,000	184
Self-employed	430,000	470,000	109
Hotels, Theatres	181,000	220,000	121.5
Professional	542,000	652,000	120
Domestic service	1,658,000	1,250,000	75
Local & National government & teaching	262,000	460,000	175
Totals	5,925,000	7,103,000	+19.88%

Source: David Bilton, *The Home Front in the Great War*, p.95.

included the prohibition of females from heavy work in unsafe conditions and the curtailment of long hours during the working week. (33) Marwick argues that this was the war that enabled females to become established in the heavier types of industry during the conflict, with the important qualification that many women were bound by trade union agreements and expected to leave their industrial occupations and return to their pre-war work at the end of the conflict. This was to enable returning demobilized men to resume their previous employment with the full agreement of the appropriate trade union.

Hinckley undertook numerous government contracts during the war. In the hosiery industry this was notably for military uniforms and clothes. But as more men left the town's hosiery industry, it became apparent that either women would need to be allowed to carry out heavier work in the industry, or there needed to be more reserved occupations amongst the male workers. Following two area meetings in December 1915 between Rogers, the Superintending Inspector of Factories, and the local unions (34), an agreement was reached with immediate effect whereby women were allowed into all production areas as operatives, albeit under five stringent rules:

1. The women had to be physically fit to operate the production machinery
2. Women were to be paid the same piecework rate as men
3. They were only to be employed where trained males were not available
4. All agreements were to be considered temporary and would cease with the ending of the war
5. Disputes would be resolved by an adjudication committee comprising employers and trade union officials. An independent chairman could be co-opted if considered necessary (35)

This was the nearest the hosiery industries came to the principle of 'dilution', in that unskilled female workers, never before considered to be suitable for the more technical and highly paid jobs, would now, by trade union agreement, be allowed to work in those areas.

Attempts to find out what actually happened in Hinckley during the war are hindered by what appears to have been the covert censoring of articles appearing in the *Hinckley Times* by the newspaper's proprietor, Baxter. This was particularly true in the case of women and employment, both during and post war. However, such information can be found in the public domain, for example by a series of articles appearing in the Labour Party publication, the *Leicester Pioneer*, and in forming the subject of newspaper debate elsewhere, but not in Hinckley. The *Leicester Pioneer* of the 26th January 1917, under the heading 'Position of Women after the War', (36) carried a full report of the annual conference of the Women's Labour League held at Salford. Obviously party politics played a large part

in the insertion of this item, but it does demonstrate that, not only were such meetings taking place, but that they were being reported. One resolution passed at the conference was the demand for financial compensation for those women forced to return to lower paid peacetime work at the conclusion of the war. This applied to women working in jobs held by men who were serving in the armed forces. From some perspectives, it is perhaps understandable that this item would not have appeared in the *Hinckley Times*, as it could have caused severe disruption to the collective bargain made between the factory owners and trade unions in Hinckley.



Peace Day procession of July 19th 1919 at Burbage. The children appear healthy and well-dressed, an indication of the comparative prosperity of Hinckley and the surrounding villages. (From the private collection of R. D. King.)

The following month, the *Hinckley Times* of 10th February 1917 reported on a Hinckley council meeting at which the subject of National Service was debated. T. Beardsmore was of the general opinion that there were no unemployed men or women in the town. Bott made no reference to women in his submission and was adamant that no more skilled men could be lost from the hosiery trade if production was to be maintained. (37) With his comment that the loss of two skilled men could leave 250 others without work leads to the conclusion that women, at least to the local hosiery owners, were still identified as unskilled workers at this later stage of the war. This total dependence on the male workers was to continue during the post war period. The 'hand of Baxter' can be discerned in this report. It is improbable that over 200 operatives, engaged on government contracts, would have been thrown out of work by the loss of two or three men, but the crucial point is that was how the matter was reported, and therefore would be understood throughout the town.

Where female workers in Hinckley wanted to undertake a change of work involving the learning of greater skills, or higher wages, this appears to have been difficult to accomplish. An analysis of an advertisement for munitions workers appearing in the *Hinckley Times* of 16th January 1917 (38) explains why Government contracts had been awarded to Hinckley hosiery companies at the onset of war for military uniform cloth, this being to keep the local

hosiery workers in full employment. (39) As the advertisement was worded, the contractual nature of the munitions work shows many women would have been excluded from entering the armaments industry on employment or on residency grounds. The advertisement could, however, have attracted female school leavers. Elsewhere in Leicester and Leicestershire however, women had started to go into munitions work after the Ministry of Munitions was established in May 1915. (40) In Hinckley, the strictures on munitions work assisted the town's hosiery factory owners to retain their existing female staff on lower skilled and lower paid work, with many of the skilled local hosiery jobs becoming reserved male occupations. In time, as labour shortages became more prevalent, women in the Hinckley hosiery industry were to benefit by increased wages obtained by the hosiery trades unions.

Conclusions

To Stevenson, Bilton and Wilson, the model of women in wartime Britain tends to centre on the gradual absorption of females into the manufacturing and transport industries. This was not the case in Hinckley as women already formed a significant part of the local hosiery industry as indeed they had done since the eighteenth century. What does appear to have happened is that during the war many working class women of Hinckley continued to work in the town's hosiery factories, now on vital war work, although not necessarily making the crossover into more skilled hosiery jobs, nor into better paid work in one of the town's munitions factories. As wage earners in their own right, those with husbands away for the war, would have some personal means to support themselves and their children at home.

Many of the less fortunate and underprivileged women of Hinckley with limited initial and later potentially non-existent means of male wage earning support during the war, needed to look for support from elsewhere. In Leicester and elsewhere in Leicestershire, much of this came from charitable work, primarily organised by women from the middle and upper classes. (41) In Hinckley, it is noticeable that it was the wives and daughters of the town's manufacturers, professionals and councillors, who played the greatest part in organising relief and providing support. The women provided leadership and organisational skills, linking their activities into national relief networks.

Research into the Ladies' Visiting Committee, the investigatory arm of the Hinckley Soldiers' and Sailors' Families Association, has shown their activities ranged from fighting for the correct pension benefits for servicemen's dependants and underprivileged women to the provision of maternity care for expectant mothers. The services of the committee's women were heavily in demand, particularly during the early days of the conflict, and accomplished a lot

at very little cost to the central government.

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