

# Buckinghamshire in World War One: The Home Front

Much attention has been focused on the soldiers who went to war, but little has been written about those who were left behind, and even less about life in Buckinghamshire. World War I reached into the lives of every person in this country in a way which previous wars had not. From school children to old women, from farmers to factory workers every person was impacted in some way and expected to use their skills as part of the war effort. The aim of these pages is to show the impact the war had on people in Buckinghamshire and to give a flavour of what life was like for those left behind.

The text pages have limited illustrations; more can be found on a companion CD entitled "The Home Front in WWI" and which can be purchased from the Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies for £10. There is also a select bibliography on the final page.

Both text pages and CD represent a small amount of the information that can be found about WWI at the Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies. Teachers are welcome to visit the archives and local studies areas of the Centre, and we can organise school visits although we do not have the space to accommodate large numbers of pupils. Should you require more information about resources held at the Centre or advice about how to use this pack, please contact the archives on 01296 382587 or email [archives@buckscc.gov.uk](mailto:archives@buckscc.gov.uk).



Royal Artillery leave for France after being billeted at Ivinghoe, 1916. (CBS ref phIvinghoe56)

## Part 3: Agriculture and Industry

# Agriculture and Industry

At the outbreak of war in August 1914 the Government announced that it had four months supply of wheat. In the 40 years before 1914 Britain had been importing most of the wheat needed from Canada. Farmers in Britain could not compete with the low prices of imported grain and turned to dairying or left their land fallow. Although the Government said it would provide protection for grain ships coming from Canada it was obvious that Britain would have to start growing more wheat. Arable farming is a more labour-intensive industry than dairying so farmers were being asked to change to arable farming and spend money on bringing land back into cultivation; at the same time they faced labour shortages due to the enlistment of a large number of men in the months after the outbreak of war.

In Buckinghamshire many men worked in agriculture and associated areas of employment. The loss of much of its labour force at the same time as the Government was urging farmers to grow more grain led farmers to voice their concerns through the county's Agricultural Association and through letters to the press.

Various suggestions were made as to what should be done about this problem. Some thought that agricultural labourers should be exempt from enlistment whilst others looked round for replacement workers. There was initial hostility to employing women who were considered incapable of doing specialised farm work and whose role was seen as that of wife and mother. By 1917, 300,000 farm labourers had been enlisted as a result of which the labour shortage had become acute.

Farming at the time of World War I was very different from today. Mechanisation was very limited, and horse drawn machinery was the norm. This photograph shows a land girl using a horse drawn rake in 1915. (CBS ref AR90/1970)



Sidney Wigley was in charge of a successful firm of estate agents based in Winslow at the outbreak of war. He took an active part in the county's War Agricultural Executive Committee which was set up to oversee and increase production in the county. In this letter he explains how his firm of estate agents has suffered from losing men to the war. His sense of frustration is clear and he feels he cannot continue with his work for the War Agricultural Committee. We may be sure that his experience was not uncommon. (AR90/84/14/1 p102)

*At the commencement of the War I lost three of my men in my London office, who were mobilised or joined up, and have had to close the office. My Brother and Partner also joined up, as well as one of the members of my Winslow staff who was in the Yeomanry.*

*During the course of the last eighteen months I have lost the remaining members of my original staff at Winslow and am now left only with my manger (aged 32, married, passed General Service) for whom I have been granted Final Exemption for about another two months, leaving me with two men only in my office here –neither of whom have had any previous knowledge of my business*

## Women's Land Army

Many campaigned for women to be given a more prominent role in the country's war efforts.

The continuation of the war through 1915 and 1916 with its continual drain on labour made many farmers change their mind and accept women's help.

In 1917 the Women's National Land Service Corps (Women's Land Army or WLA) was set up.

Women's Agricultural Committees were established in all counties. They provided training schemes at Agricultural Colleges, hostels for women to live in, equipment and general support.

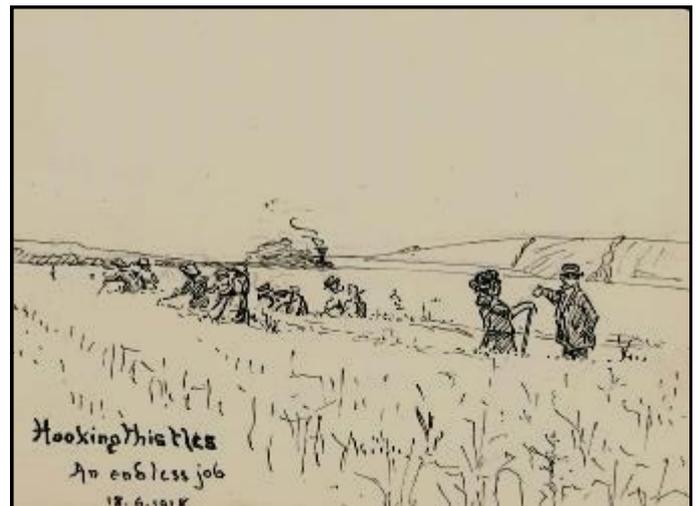
Recruitment was stiff. Three references had to be supplied by professional men; the applicant had to be prepared to sign on for 6 or 12 months; and there was a rigorous interview.

In the country as a whole 45,000 girls applied of whom 50% were accepted. The successful applicants received 4-6 weeks training and were supplied with a uniform (knee length overall with belt, 2 pairs of boots, gaiters, soft hat, and breeches). By 1918 12,637 girls were in the Land Army. In Buckinghamshire 1,517 girls volunteered.

The Women's Land Army was a great success. In 1918 when 40,000 troops who had been working on the land were sent to France there was no concern that it was women who would take their places. The experience of doing such useful work gave young girls a new outlook on life. The pre-war ideal of wife and mother would no longer be enough.



Florence Fremantle was a member of a prominent local family from Swanbourne in Buckinghamshire. She joined the WLA after leaving school in 1917 and worked on two farms in Hertfordshire. A collection of her drawings and photographs from this time along are held at the Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies and her uniform is in the Bucks County Museum. She is shown here in her land army uniform in 1917, shortly after she had joined up. Also shown are some of her sketches of the farming work the land girls were involved with. (CBS ref AR90/1970)



## Increase in Arable farming

Although many changed their minds about employing women on the land the problem of increasing the acreage of arable land was more difficult. Farmers were resistant, worrying about the end of the war when competition from Canadian wheat would begin again. They had suffered 40 years of depression due to foreign imports and were hard to persuade.

Sidney Wigley from Winslow was charged with persuading farmers to agree to increasing their arable acreage. As part of the War Agricultural Committee, he conducted a survey in 1917 of the farms in the Winslow district with a view to making them more productive. He could if necessary purchase land compulsorily but tried persuasion first. His letters show that he was fighting a very hard battle and with very little success. These extracts describe the feelings of farmers being expected to increase their production. (CBS ref AR90/84/14/1 p41)

The crying need of the Districts I have dealt with has been one of Labour, and on many Farms in the hands of practical men, I have found field after field gone out of cultivation and producing nothing but filth and twitch, and although this relates more largely to the heavy clay lands, it does not relate solely to those lands.

I do not think that Farmers generally will be induced, at any rate to work the heavier lands which have recently been laid down, unless there is a reasonable prospect of their reaping some benefit by the change, and although some Farmers have a dislike to Arable Land, I have found many who have stated quite frankly that they would like more Arable Land if they had the Labour and they could be assured of a reasonable return for their outlay; but all this, of course, is conditional on the necessary Labour being obtainable.

Prisoners of War as well as women were brought in to help with the labour shortage. Dick Kimber lived in Marlow and he remembered them with affection (D/X 1908):

*They were in German uniforms except on the backs of their tunics there was a circle of white...and they were really a high class type of fellow, the Prussian guards, and we really got quite, you know, really fond of them. I believe my mother used to break all the laws there were and give them a little bit of food at lunchtime. They were terribly strong. I can remember them pitching sheaves of corn. It wasn't one at a time, it was at least two at a time when our men would do one at a time.*

## Industry

The need to arm and clothe so many men for war meant that industries had to change to meet the needs. Being a mainly agricultural county Buckinghamshire's primary role was to help produce food. Nonetheless, furniture manufacturers in Wycombe used their skills to produce wooden parts for aircraft and Chesham cobblers provided boots for soldiers. In industry, as in agriculture, the loss of men to the army meant that women had to step in to fill the gap. Women from Buckinghamshire left their homes and went to work in munitions factories at places as far apart as Woolwich in London or Gretna in Scotland living in purpose built hostels. Theodora Roscoe left her home in Chalfont St. Peter to help organise recruitment to the munitions works at Gretna.

The accommodation at the munitions factory Theodora Roscoe went to work in. This was part of a booklet produced to attract female workers. It describes the work the women would be expected to do (making explosive to pack behind shells) and includes photographs of various buildings in the township created to house the workers.(CBS ref D115/89)

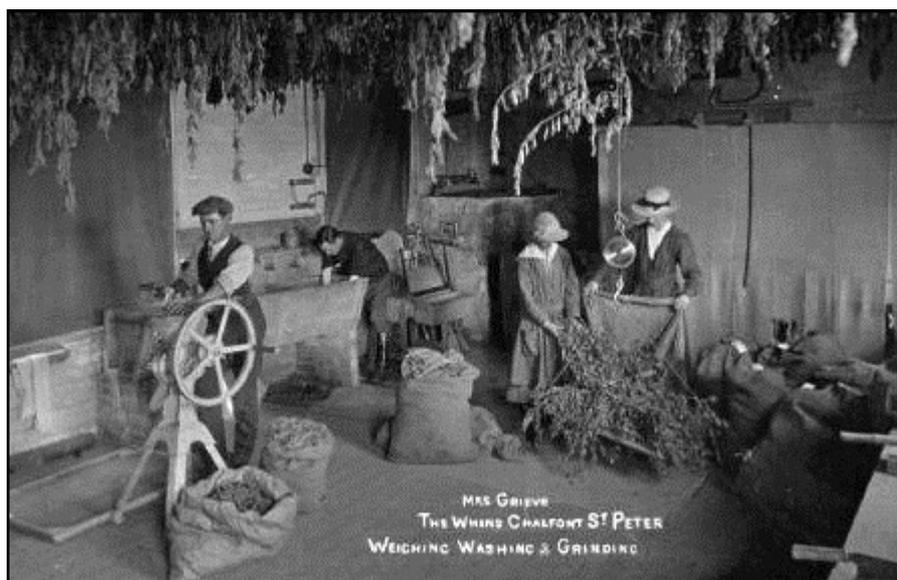


Although Buckinghamshire lacked large industrial factories, local family manufacturers used their skills to make munitions for the war. Wethereds brewery company at Marlow produced explosive and anti-aircraft shells; the Gomme family's furniture business (later G-Plan) made wooden parts for aircraft. They also made boxes for munitions; shown here are workers who made boxes for military shells. Note the number of women being employed. (CBS ref D/GP/131)



### **Herb farm and school at “The Whins”, Chalfont St Peter**

The need for medicines in wartime was inevitably great. At this time they were all being made from natural plant sources and before the war the majority had been imported from Germany and Austria. In 1914 the government enlisted Mrs Maud Grieve (1858-1941) of Chalfont St Peter as a prime producer of medicinal herbs. She also trained women and wrote a series of pamphlets about growing and drying herbs. Based at her home Whins Cottage she used the six acres of land attached to grow a wide variety of herbs which were then dried in a large shed. Growing herbs was seen as a worthwhile and suitable employment for women and they were encouraged to collect and grow medicinal plants in their own gardens. Maud industriously wrote and distributed her leaflets across the country throughout the war and afterwards. Among her workers were some of the Belgian refugees who had come to Chalfont St Peter.



Maud in her drying shed, described as the finest drying shed in private hands. (CBS ref phChalfont St Peter 13)