

Choices for Women

A hundred years ago, the lives of ‘the weaker sex’ were often restricted to traditional domestic roles. But when war broke out, women were needed to do the work of the men who had gone to the colours (though they were paid less for it).



NURSES AND DOCTORS

Red Cross volunteers worked at home and abroad. As Voluntary Aid Detachment personnel (VADs) they cared for sick and wounded sailors and soldiers.

The Hexham Courant reported that ten women ‘working unceasingly and unsparingly’ as VAD nurses had been awarded Red Cross decorations.

In Hexham and Stocksfield, women organised working-parties to fill hampers with bandages, swabs and other supplies for hospitals on Tyneside and in France. ‘Praise God for such motherly and sisterly love and comforts,’ wrote a Courant reporter.

WOMEN’S AUXILIARY ARMY CORPS

The WAAC offered women roles in Army, but only as cooks, cleaners or clerks.

WOMEN’S LAND ARMY

So many farm workers had joined up that a Land Army of women was needed.

As long skirts were impractical in the fields, Land Army women were issued with smocks, twill breeches, laced gaiters and boots, and sun-hats in summer.

Concern was expressed that the manual work – and especially the trousers – would lead to a ‘loss of womanly attributes’. Nevertheless, 6,672

Tynedale women registered. The romantic picture of work on the land shown in the poster above would have been far from the reality.



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WORKING AT HOME

When the war was not ‘all over by Christmas’, knitting comforts for the troops became a patriotic duty for women.

Patterns were circulated. The 4th Northumberland Comforts Committee was formed. Lt Col Gibson told The Courant that ‘Mufflers and mittens are always acceptable. The mufflers should be not more than 58 inches long.’



Gertie Cowing



Thomas Blakey Cowing before the war, with his butcher's delivery cart.



BEARING LOSS

The war brought terrible grief to millions of people. For women left to bring up children alone, the pain of those deaths was particularly sharp.

Thomas Blakey Cowing owned a butcher's shop at 7, Ratcliffe Road, Haydon Bridge. He volunteered for the 'The

Commercials', 16th Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers. His principal duty was as butcher to the Battalion.

Before he volunteered, he rented out his business so as to secure an income for his wife, Gertie, and to support their four children, the youngest of whom was born in January 1916.

Many of the letters they exchanged have survived. In February 1916, because Tom had not written for some time, Gertie jokingly commented, 'I was beginning to think the Germans had got you'.

On 2nd March 1916, while he was digging a trench, Tom Cowing was hit by a high-velocity shell. He died two days later of his wounds. The letter with Gertie's light-hearted comment was returned to her with his personal possessions, 'all a soldier had'.



We can guess at the depth of her distress since she put the parcel away, still in its brown-paper packing, and never looked at it again. The family found it long after her death, together with Tom's medals. Their ribbons had never been put on.

The butcher's shop was sold, and Gertie augmented her war-widow's pension by seasonal work in a market garden. A local family offered to adopt one of her sons, but she raised all four of her children alone and never married again.

PTE. T. B. COWING, KILLED IN ACTION.

The sad news was received on Thursday by Mrs T. B. Cowing, Ratcliffe Road, Haydon Bridge, that her husband, Private T. B. Cowing, "B" Coy., 16th Northumberland Fusiliers (Commercial Battalion) was killed in action on the 4th inst.

The news was conveyed in a letter from 2nd-Lieut. R. McLean, dated, "Front Line, Saturday, 4th March, 1916. After intimating Private Cowing's death he says:—"As his platoon officer I found in him an estimable character, straight, and upright, and the heart and soul of the platoon. He was with me as well as with the rest of the platoon and Company, a very popular favourite, always merry and alive with wit. He died, as others have and will die, in the service of his country—a glorious death. In your sad bereavement the profound sympathy of all of us is extended to you."

Private Cowing was 34 years of age, a native of and well-known in Haydon Bridge, and popular with all circles. He joined the Commercial Battalion of the Northumberland Fusiliers in November, 1914, and went out to the Front with his regiment last year. He leaves a widow and four young children, the youngest, only two months old, was the first to be baptised at the new font recently gifted to the Haydon Bridge Parish Church. The news was received in Haydon Bridge with the greatest regret, and much sympathy is ex-

Notice of Pte Cowing's death, Hexham Courant 11th March 1916