


Original citation:

Andrews, Maggie  (2020) *Worcestershire's Women: Local Studies and the Gender Politics of the First World War and its Legacy*. *History: The Journal of the Historical Association*. ISSN Online: 1468-229X (In Press)

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-229X.12917>

Permanent WRaP URL:


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Worcestershire's Women: local studies and the gender politics of the First World War and its legacy

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On February 6th 1918, the Representation of the People Act was passed; it enfranchised all men over twenty-one and women over the age of thirty if either they, or their husband, met the requisite property qualifications. In public and media history this legislation is regarded as a reward for women's contribution to the war effort and evidence that one of the legacies of the First World War was a range of new opportunities for women.¹ This history has remained stubbornly in place during the four years of the First World War centenary commemoration, although it disregards the degree to which women's experience of the conflict was infinitely varied, influenced by class, age, marital status and a multitude of other factors including whether women were an urban or rural dwellers. This article makes the case for the importance of local studies, which have the potential to remind us that a national narrative is not necessarily the national narrative and that global wars have very local and personal consequences at the time and in the years that follow. It is, after all, in the mundane and the everyday where gender politics plays out, in the multiple, sometimes tiny, interactions reliant upon the exercise and internalisation of power in intimate and very personal spaces. It is in the politics of the home, the street, the workplace or leisure spaces that power relations are worked through, challenged, stretched and re-interpreted.

The research that will be drawn upon has been undertaken with community groups, archives, museums, BBC researchers and students in Worcestershire that pursued three simultaneous and inter-related areas of

enquiry to dig down into gender politics of domestic rural women's lives. The first involved an interrogation of the geographical, cultural and economic specificity of rural women's wartime lives in Worcestershire, and particularly the fruit growing areas of Pershore and the Evesham Vale where the specific nature of agricultural production played a crucial role in shaping communities. The second was an examination of women's organisations and particularly the local and county records and memories of the Women's Institute movement that developed in Worcestershire from 1916. Finally, an examination of the activities of women who transitioned from suffrage campaigners to wartime volunteers and then voters was undertaken. In each of these areas, following the biographical turn in recent feminist scholarship, there was an attempt to piece together the life stories of local women, even though only snippets and traces of some working or middle class women's biographies can be found.² The research produced what is sometimes referred to as 'messy history' suggesting multiple perspectives on the era of the First World War and its aftermath.³ For some rural women in Worcestershire, there were small but subtle changes; they gained experiences and confidence that enabled them to articulate women's issues and demands in the era of enfranchisement.

Academic histories of the both unstable and tenacious gender relations during the First World War and any potentially shifting gender politics in its aftermath have, like popular narratives, been susceptible to sweeping generalisations. For example, Arthur Marwick argued that global war led to social change for women,⁴ which has been challenged by Mary Perrot who suggests the conflict consolidated or strengthened gender divisions.⁵ Likewise

the nuanced and detailed studies of historians such as Susan Grayzel, Deborah Thom, Joanna Bourke, Susan Pedersen, Karen Hunt, Nicoletta Gullace, Janet Watson, Susan Kingsley Kent, Lucy Noakes, Christine Hallett and Alison Fell have also sought to dispel the myth that the First World War liberated women.⁶ This myth is often linked to the increased involvement in paid work in wartime, which gave the munitions worker, the land army girl and the nurse iconic status. However, much of their work was so entwined with the specific needs of conflict that it evaporated with the peace, and employment of women returned to pre-war levels.⁷ Furthermore, Karen Hunt has pointed out that the majority of women were housewives during the conflict.⁸ Many rural women, like the Worcestershire women who are the focus of this article, combined their domestic roles and responsibilities with paid, unpaid or voluntary work; albeit seasonal and part-time which was often unacknowledged or unseen. For many of these women the boundaries and divisions between being housewives and agricultural labourers, domestic labour and food production were more porous than perhaps historians imagine.

Domestic life remains the 'unofficial female history'⁹ of the conflict in part because housewives' lives are not easy to trace; they are in many ways hidden in archival sources. Researching rural women's lives, their involvement in domestic and paid work requires trawling through multiple but fleeting references that can be found in newspapers, diaries, letters, school log books and local government and voluntary organisation's records, reports of military tribunals, ephemera, photographs and memories which offer snippets and traces of minutiae, minor happenings and concerns of women's

lives. Arguably this is only possible through local case studies, an approach, social historians of gender interrogating the lives of women in the first half of the twentieth century are well attuned to.¹⁰

Local history however, requires local involvement; it cannot be done from within the hallowed ivory towers of academia. It needs in the best traditions of the History Workshop Movement and the Women's History Network to cross the academic and non – academic divide. It requires the participation of local people. In so doing it follows the approaches of the early History Workshop Conferences, of Women's History walks and oral history projects in the 1970s and 1980s. Working with communities who are producing local histories holds out the possibility, although not necessarily perhaps the probability, of developing, stretching and reworking understanding of the gender politics of the First World War and its legacy, of uncovering unofficial narratives of the past. For there still remains in the stories, photographs, letters or materials kept in attics and cupboards resources which shed light on those who have been hidden from history.¹¹ The four years of commemoration has brought some of these materials into the public domain through the activities of community history groups, local media, museums, archives services and heritage sites seeking to engage people in creating personal or local commemorative histories of the conflict many of them funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. The research and construction of these local histories 'made by a thousand hands',¹² has the potential to enrich academic understanding of the conflict, to uncover new sources and local narratives of the conflict, which it can help to uncover the

changes and continuities in a period of social upheaval caused by a global war and its aftermath when some women were finally enfranchised.

I

The immediate responses to the outbreak of hostilities in Worcestershire in 1914, assumed that war was men's business and women would primarily perform a supportive role during the conflict. This view was summed up by the *Worcester Herald*, which explained to its female readers that 'we women have to think how we can best aid our soldiers at the front and their families at home, there is much we can do and there are some things which we should certainly refrain from doing'.¹³ The newspaper guidance was arguably targeted towards middle class women of the county, who it was hoped would refrain from the panic buying that emptied the shops on the day that war was declared and who it was justifiably expected would engage in volunteering work in support of charities such as the Red Cross. The emphasis on self – restraint and service to others shaped many women's wartime experiences, shifting and escalating domestic tasks as they sought to aid 'the' or 'their' men in the forces. Advice like this was given out to women up and down the country, but the specific agricultural make-up of Worcestershire meant that many women's priorities lay in maintaining the family businesses and working on the land to ensure that Britain and its armies had an adequate food supply as the U-boats made the county's heavy reliance on imports of food unsustainable.

In 1914, Worcestershire was described, as the 'home of the smallholder' with farms of under fifty acres responsible for seventy-five per cent of the county's agriculture.¹⁴ In Pershore and the Evesham Vale, the micro-climate of the soil and location of the region protected on one side by the Malvern Hills and on the other by the Cotswolds was particularly suited to growing fruit and vegetables. There were some large apple orchards and plum growers but production frequently took place on small intensively worked market gardens; there were 3,000 small units of between one and five acres in the county. Their produce was sold well beyond the local region via co-operative markets and growers associations, including the Pershore Co-operative Fruit Market established in 1910.

Women whose families ran a smallholding in rural Worcestershire were already making an established, although sometimes hidden, contribution to food production, preservation and preparation prior to the outbreak of war. This took place alongside other domestic tasks, so that their day might include weeding, caring for poultry, baking, taking cows to graze on Defford Common, washing, harvesting fruit and in autumn picking damsons and blackberries from Tiddsley Woods if they lived in the Pershore area. In a conflict in which food became a weapon of war, all of these tasks became significant wartime work, as did the labour of housewives who were increasingly responsible for tending the cottage gardens and allotments when their men joined up. Britain imported approximately sixty per cent of its food at the outbreak of war and cottage gardens and allotments, which at the outbreak of war produced only just over two per cent of the food supply, are estimated to have increased their contribution to the nation's food supply to closer to ten per cent by the

end of the conflict.¹⁵ The rural housewife made a significant contribution to this shift and a newspaper in 1917 remarked that 'the countrywoman has become a very valuable asset to the nation. But for her, in many villages throughout the country, there would be no one to care for the gardens and allotments'.¹⁶

Smallholdings were finely balanced small subsistence agricultural units that relied upon family labour. At intermittent points of time they needed the efforts of husbands, wives and children and harvesting fruit and vegetables drew upon the assistance of relations from further afield. One woman brought up in Birmingham remembered how in the inter-war years her family returned to Worcestershire for a two week annual 'holiday' in summer to help their grandfather bring in the harvest.¹⁷ Women sometimes ran smallholdings themselves, but more often domestic and agricultural labour ran alongside and intertwined with one another as they worked the land with their husbands or sons who might also have other employment.¹⁸ Adverts for the sale or lease of market gardens sometimes suggest that smaller units were expected to provide men with a part-time or full-time income only. Reports of the military tribunals between 1916 and 1918 indicate a number of families worked smallholdings alongside other paid-work. Men were employed as carters, publicans, postmen or agricultural workers on larger market gardens and farms. These larger agricultural units sometimes stretched to over two hundred acres and provided part-time casual work for women and families in the summer months to ensure that the valuable fruit was speedily harvested.

The voluntary recruitment of men into the armed forces in 1914 and 1915, whether husbands, sons or brothers, could threaten the viability of a

smallholding or place extra burdens on women. In Bretforton, which lies at the heart of the Vale's asparagus-growing region, the men resisted appeals from the recruiting officer and the reading aloud of a list of twenty-five eligible men accompanied by accusations of cowardice in March 1915.¹⁹ Without continued care of the valuable crop, due to be harvested and sold within the following months, the long-term viability of family smallholdings would be threatened. Despite propaganda posters no women in this village would have 'said go' to their husbands or sons at this time of the year. Letters from men who had signed up reveal their concern at the added strain their absence placed on wives running smallholdings and cottage gardens on their own and having to take on also seemingly small yet still significant semi-domestic tasks which were once their responsibility. John Wheeler, a married man with a daughter and another child on the way, volunteered in spring 1915 and in his early letters to his wife suggested she get help to 'sharpen the carving knife'. By December 1915, he is again concerned and wrote: 'So sorry to think of you salting the pig without me. Do be careful not to slip on the cellar steps. The pig will pay quite well after'.²⁰ The pig played a crucial role in the domestic economy of cottagers and smallholders, but its slaughter, butchering and salting were physically onerous tasks that some wives would have struggled to complete unaided.

The introduction of conscription in 1916, left some women with no choice but to struggle on alone and keep smallholdings going with limited assistance. Frank Thomas a thirty five year old man with five acres of fruit and grazing land was exempted from service on condition that he promised to help a neighbouring farmer with his ninety-nine acres.²¹ Others were not so lucky.

Local tribunals were initially sympathetic to the needs of market gardeners, but their decisions were frequently reversed at county level in response to appeals from the military. Instead of an exemption, the date of a man's enlistment was often delayed until the harvest was gathered in or some other crucial work on their farm or smallholding was completed. Nell Haynes of Newlands must have been very relieved that although her husband, Will, went to war in 1914, the army gave him leave to return from fighting on the Western Front in France during the Battle of the Somme in 1916 to help gather the harvest on their small holding in Pershore. Will did not however survive his return to France and the Christmas parcel she sent him later that year was left unopened, leaving his wife a widow with four small children.²² In the years that followed she ran the smallholding with her children's assistance. Her precarious finances were supplemented by a widow's pension. Nell and other women continued to run smallholdings with or without the assistance of husbands or sons both before, during and after the conflict. For the majority of rural women on smallholdings and market gardens the conflict was a short blip in their lives; if their menfolk were absent or if their sons or husbands were killed or injured, the balance of their intertwined domestic and agricultural labour was changed rather than destroyed.

Whether a man was considered to be undertaking essential war-work rested upon convincing the military tribunal that their job could not be undertaken by a woman. The tribunals thus became a forum for debate about exactly what work women could do, but the arguments were shaped by the individual agendas of all concerned – farmers, military representatives and potential recruits. There was no patience for example for the suggestion that

only men could climb ladders to pick fruit on taller trees, prune them or spray them to prevent various pests from damaging the crop. Unsurprisingly even women unfamiliar with fruit picking mastered the art of climbing ladders, though it was not without hazard as one young woman recalled:

Plum-picking proves exciting at times, when two ladders locked together over a tree begin to slip, and the pickers clasp hands in terror, gazing with agony into each other's eyes, waiting for the end-which is fortunately averted by the interposition of a lower branch.²³

Worcestershire was a major producer of fruit used to produce jam for soldiers and with bread, provided a staple of food in the diets of civilians working in wartime industrial production. Worcestershire's larger farms, were increasingly required to grow more grain as were the more substantial market gardens that had predominately employed male agricultural labour before the conflict. They struggled to cope with labour shortages, even before conscription was introduced. In the winter of 1915 Mr Allsebrook from the Board of Agriculture explained to a meeting in Worcestershire that:

it was a matter of great urgency that we should produce more food in this country, and so retain money to pay for other things we had to import, such as the munitions of war. The chief difficulty that confronted agriculture was the question of labour.²⁴

It had already been noted in Worcestershire that 'Female labour has been introduced in all branches of farming work' but the supply was 'altogether inadequate to meet the demand'.²⁵ The proposal of Mr James Woodyatt, Chairman of the Malvern Urban District Council Sub-Committee, that if a woman did a man's work she ought to receive a man's wages was not relished by local employers.²⁶ His further suggestion that 'those who came under the category of "the idle rich" should be asked to work' was equally problematic.²⁷ Harvesting of fruit and vegetables, to feed the army and those living in the towns, was increasingly understood to be a valuable contribution to the war-effort. Assistance came in the summer months from Belgium refugees, Boy Scouts, school children, soldiers in barracks or convalescing and students from beyond the county borders. When the Women's Land Army was instigated in 1917 they too sent labour to the area.²⁸

Women's response to the conditions of agricultural work and the wages paid was varied, shaped by their personal circumstances and the degree to which they saw it as quasi- voluntary war work or a means of survival. A Birmingham University student, described her six weeks of work in slightly humorous but broadly positive terms. She and other women students 'picked peas of all varieties and peas in all directions - in Elmley itself, at Fladbury, Cropthorne, Wick, and Evesham ... We occasionally got variations from pea-picking, gathering raspberries, blackcurrants, broad and kidney beans.'²⁹ However other young middle-class girls found agricultural work tedious or exploitative. A London Magistrate whose daughter apparently chose to spend her summer engaged in fruit picking to support the war effort, complained bitterly that she had found fruitpicking in Worcestershire filled the farmer's

pockets and left hers empty. Once she had paid for her food, travel, rubber boots and clothes needed to undertake the task there was little money left over.³⁰ This young girl's middle class sensibilities also seem to have been affronted by the working and living conditions of agricultural labourers, nevertheless the employment of young women and of children grew during the conflict. Working class rural families worked on the land for economic not patriotic reasons. As the demand for labour grew school attendance fell. It went down from 91.1 per cent in 1914 to 85.4 per cent by 1917 as both girls and boys replaced lessons to work in agriculture.³¹

Mr Allsebrook of the Board of Agriculture, when visiting Worcestershire in 1915, expressed his concern that 'the labourer's wives and daughters had not realised the extreme need of help' on the land.³² Married women, many of whom already undertook paid work during harvest time, were seen as an unharnessed resource who could and should be persuaded to undertake more work at other times of the year.³³ Women's reticence was explained by commentators in a number of ways. When husbands had enlisted and they received separation allowances there was anxiety about their independence and it was suggested women were unwilling to work as they were 'receiving sufficient money to live without resorting to manual toil'.³⁴ There were suggestions that 'If women were provided with stout boots and clogs and equipped so that they could face the discomfort and unpleasantness of winter work on the land without the prospect of wet feet and consequent colds, there would be probably many more ready to work'.³⁵ A Birmingham University student described how volunteers in the summer went to work wearing 'a marvelous motley-old waterproofs, mackintosh skirts, hockey leggings, old

hats, bathing caps, sun-bonnets, motor-coats, anything old which would keep out the wet'.³⁶ Such ad hoc clothing would not suffice in damp and cold winter months when maintenance work was needed to ensure the continued productivity of the land. By the end of 1916 German POWs were brought in to do this instead.

In meetings and newspapers there was debate about the degree to which agricultural work beyond the family smallholding or market garden was compatible with domestic responsibilities. In some quarters apprehension was expressed about the welfare of children if mothers worked. Alternatively, others criticized working class mothers' reluctance to leave their children to work in the fields as unpatriotic. Children sometimes accompanied their mothers when working, or were left with a friend or neighbour. A six-month-old baby, Mary Sophia Bowter, whose father as a reservist had been called up in 1914, was left in the care of her ten-year-old aunt when her mother was employed hop-picking in Fladbury. When the child died the mother was not censured. The Coroner was of the opinion that while it was a case for enquiry, there was no neglect and the Jury returned their fees to the mother.³⁷ Similarly the *Worcester Herald* praised a married woman, who being 'too delicate for farm work of any sort', had established at her cottage a form of miniature crèche, minding the children of women who were fit for outdoor work such as weeding, hoeing, and raking.³⁸ Radical proposals made to improve the supply of women's labour by organising crèches or nurseries and the providing of laundries to undertake the children's washing had limited take-up.³⁹

Wartime may have increased the numbers of women working and the amount of part-time work women did on farms, market gardens and smallholdings. The conflict certainly made women's work and debates about the suitability of work for women more visible. Thus in 1918 a newspaper remarked that women climbing ladders and fruit picking 'like many similar jobs now successfully accomplished by women, in pre-war days it was considered "men's work"'.⁴⁰ In Worcestershire such work was considered family, not men's or women's work before, during and after the conflict. Wartime affirmed, tweaked or stretched already existing patterns of women's work rather than led to any significant, overall long-term changes. The situation, which Alun Howkins identified in the inter-war years whereby 'few operations in the agricultural cycle functioned without the work of women' held true in Worcestershire before and during the war.⁴¹ Some of the organisations that were set up to encourage women's agricultural work had longer-term significance however.

II

By the end of 1915, the shift from volunteerism to compulsion, from ad hoc arrangements to greater centralization and conformity that Adrian Gregory has identified as fundamental to the way in which the First World War was waged, were well under way.⁴² This led to the introduction of military conscription, enshrined in the Military Service Act in January 1916, but the participation of women in all work continued to rely on persuasion, pressure and encouragement. Structures and organisations were introduced to support

this operating more effectively. County War Agricultural Executive Committees were set up in autumn of 1915 to increase the agricultural production, which inevitably led to consideration of labour shortages and in 1916 Worcestershire set up a Women's War Agricultural Committee. One of its main aims was to try to persuade women to register for work on the land. In pursuit of such an objective, a large public meeting was held at Shirehall, Worcester on 1 March 1916. It was attended by Mr F D Acland from the Board of Agriculture and chaired by one of the county's established landowners, Lord Coventry of Croome Court.

As the food crisis escalated in October 1916, according to the *Birmingham Daily Post*, an 'important conference was held in Worcester ... of ladies and others interested in women's work on the land in Worcestershire'.⁴³ The event was presided over by Viscountess Deerhurst, the chair of the Women's War Agricultural Committee and a wealthy American heiress who had married Lord Coventry's eldest son. Both titled landowners such as the Countess of Plymouth and Lady Hindlip, and politicians including Stanley Baldwin, farmers and market gardeners, attended it. It was addressed by those with local and national experience of involving women in the production and preservation of food. 'Mrs Watt of the Agricultural Organisation Society gave an address on Women's Institutes in villages' and 'Miss Day, Board of Agriculture organiser, described the co-operative system in operation at Upton-on-Severn collecting garden produce from the small holders and cottagers'.⁴⁴ Speeches were also delivered on various aspects of agricultural work by local and national figures including from Worcestershire, Lady

Hindlip, Mr. G.F. Hooper, Lady Isabel Margesson and the principal lady organiser of the Board of Agriculture, Miss Talbot.

Within six months a number of Women's Institutes had been formed across the county, with the support of many of the title ladies who had listened to Mrs Watt's speech. One of the first in Pershore, in the fruit-growing district of the Evesham Vale, had financial support from Mr Hooper, the chair of Pershore Co-operative Wholesale Market who owned a market garden of some twenty-eight acres. He also set up a local employment agency for women and seems to have seen this fledgling organization as both potentially addressing the agricultural labour shortage and instructing women in better domestic economy, which he hoped would curtail the need for those who worked in larger market gardens, like the one he owned, to earn higher wages.⁴⁵ There are however always significant gaps between the aims, strategies and value systems of those at national, county or a local level that set up an organisation and the priorities and inclinations of those who ran and participated in it. The cottage and middle-class women who joined the WI, in Pershore at least, presents a more complex picture of these women who developed their local branch on their own terms.

At the inaugural meeting of Pershore WI, Mrs Hooper talked of the need for increased food production saying 'We had got to use all possible man-power to thrash our enemies, and we should have to utilise all possible women-power to take the place of the men in the fields of industry'. She went on to explain, 'There was plenty of work on farms and in gardens, which women could do, and which in various parts of the country they were doing

with the greatest success'.⁴⁶ Mrs Watt's address at this meeting expressed her pleasure that 840 women had volunteered to work on the land.⁴⁷ At Pershore WI's second meeting in December 1916 a demonstration of domestic cookery, an address on 'Women on the Land' and an exhibition of Red Cross appliances and comforts for the troops continued the patriotic theme. Mrs Watt, in her talks across the West Midlands more generally, encouraged all members to ask: 'What is my home, my garden, my farm doing for my Country?' and emphasised 'the co-operative buying of seeds, owning of garden tools and both the prevention of waste, making every piece of land productive, alongside systems for the marketing of surplus produce from gardens, allotments and smallholdings'.⁴⁸ Concern to prevent food waste, and particularly of food grown in gardens and allotments led to sales tables being set up at WI meetings, and markets organized by village Institutes and in Worcester which enabled members to sell their excess garden produce.

The Worcestershire County Federation of Women's Institutes was set up in November 1917. Its initial executive committee, as David Thackeray has pointed out, had strong input from titled members of the Conservative party, and many that were involved in the Primrose League.⁴⁹ Countess Plymouth was chair, Lady Hindlip was Treasurer and Lady Margesson and Lady Deerhurst were also on the committee. However whether this contributed to the development of cross-class Tory politics as Thackeray suggests, is open to question; almost all of the titled elite were replaced as the conflict ended.⁵⁰ Initially the Federation was principally concerned with wartime food production, preparation and preservation and rural industries. They invited

Miss Petty, the Pudding Lady from London, to give a tour of the county. Miss Petty had been involved in the St Pancras School for Mothers founded in 1907 in Somers Town, a poor district of London near Easton Station.⁵¹ In wartime she became a Ministry of Agriculture lecturer whose economical and pragmatic approach to cooking was popular with working class audiences. The federation also promoted classes and instruction on cheese-making, rug-making, basket-making, cobbling and boot-mending, soft toy making, peasant embroideries, canning and jam making. They held a vegetable show, with the proceeds going to the Prisoners of War Fund, were involved in fruit bottling, canning, one area made 500 lbs of jam co-operatively.

The membership list of the women who attended the very first meeting of Pershore WI in 1916 indicates they came from a range of social backgrounds.⁵² Their ages varied. One or two were in their twenties or seventies, most were middle-aged. The majority were married, some had been widowed and others were single. Mrs Ferris's husband was a market gardener's labourer, whilst Mrs Gregory was married to a night watchman, Mrs Russell was a charwoman, Miss Roberts had retired from a life in domestic service and served on the local Food Control Committee. The WI committee included Mrs Rosa Janet Edwards, wife of a Post Office clerk and Miss Gertrude Anne Chick, a dressmaker, alongside the wives of two doctors, a vet, the vicar and some of the wealthier fruit farmers. Mr Hooper's wife, Edith Hooper, was Branch Secretary and then President, activities she combined with taking an active role in Soldiers, Sailors and Families Association and the Girls Friendly Society. Alternatively, Mrs Phillips, the vicar's wife, had for many years been a nurse at the Cottage Hospital and

also involved in the Girl's Friendly Society. Mrs Annie Rusher was a clergyman's daughter who on marrying a doctor in Pershore at the age of forty, quickly gave birth to two sons and took on the running of the local branch of the Dorcas society, a church based charity whose mission was to provide clothing to the poor. She was also active in the Girl's Friendly Society, and from 1916 in the Women's Institute.⁵³ In the post-war era she became president of the Pershore Women's Institute which had by then moved away from its original aristocratic patron Lady Deerhurst. Mrs Rusher also became chair of the local hospital's infant welfare committee and in 1936 a local magistrate; her interests helped to shape the post-war campaigning and activities of the local organization.

In wartime the Pershore WI established a rabbit and pig club, the latter operated as a form of insurance in case the family pig died.⁵⁴ It is interesting to note that Pershore already had a pig club, but the WI's wartime clubs were run by women and for the benefit of women, many of whom were taking on greater responsibility for the economic survival of their small holding or market garden including the family pig. Within wartime the local branch, like the county federation, emphasized food production, preparation and preservation as patriotic duties and at the request of the Pershore War-Savings Association undertook a brief stint running a national kitchen. 'Mr. G.F. Hooper had advanced £10 towards the initial expenses of setting this up', his motivation again seems to have been that such a kitchen would help prevent wage rises.⁵⁵ On the opening day over 130 meals were sold but despite members efforts it did not last long, as its use and operation did not conform to the national expectations.⁵⁶ Members were also encouraged to take up a

number of rural industries and crafts. Demonstrations, instruction and competitions were run in basket-making, hat trimming, needlework, toy making and co-operative boot mending, with both instruction and tools and leather being procured for women to use, all practical activities designed to help them with the battle to make ends meet which gained in popularity in the inter-war era.

The membership of Pershore WI were generally modest women who collectively sought to improve the conditions of women's everyday lives in practical and pragmatic ways. Thus in May 1917, Miss Blyth inquired whether it would be possible for the W.I. to notify the local authority of the bad state of the drains and the need for a water supply in some areas of Pershore. Both water and housing were gaining traction as key campaigns for the Women's Institute Movement and more widely with potential women voters. The newly formed National Federation of Women's Institutes, with a number of Worcestershire women on the executive, passed a motion at their 1918 AGM calling for 'the provision of a sufficient supply of convenient and sanitary houses', which they argued was of 'vital importance to women in the country' and called upon County Federations and local Women's Institutes 'to bring pressure to bear upon their local councils'.⁵⁷ At Pershore WI's October meeting in 1918, Mrs Edwards from Worcester spoke on the housing question. According to the report in the local newspaper: 'She emphasised the fact that women must spend their lives and do their work in a man-designed house making the best of a very bad article. The time had now come when women must think about what they really needed, how the interior of the house should be arranged'.⁵⁸ The following month, the first post-war election

was called, and the coalition's slogan *Home fit for Heroes* sought to appeal to new women voters by tapping into a social issue that affected other health and welfare problems amongst the working class.⁵⁹

In the post-war era, Worcestershire Federation of Women's Institutes struggled to maintain their commitment to agricultural production although they continued to have a representative on the County Agricultural Committees. Handicraft remained popular and included basketry, toy making, cobbling, glove and dressmaking and the county organized classes and regional exhibitions and part in national exhibitions. The County Federation committee sidelined most of its titled aristocratic members and in 1918 Lucy Hingley, a single woman of independent means, whose family had moved to South Worcestershire towards the end of the First World War having made their money in industry in the Black Country, began a thirteen year stint as County Federation Chairman. Hingley and a number of other members of the new county executive were strong supporters of the potential role of drama, folk song and folk dance had the capacity to re-invigorate the cultural life of villages. They also saw the potential of amateur drama, folk dance and singing for developing women's confidence and providing the hard-pressed rural housewife with a little leisure time.

Re-invigorating rural villages was a political as well as social project for the Country Federation by the end of the First World War, and WI members were encouraged to take a role in making this happen. Food preservation, bottling, canning and jam making remained on the WI agenda but did so alongside lectures which sought to develop the political engagement of new women voters, with topics such as Housing, Education and Civics. Pressure

group politics played a pivotal role in seeking to persuade local government and national government to take actions that could influence ordinary women's lives, build houses, fund libraries, provide water, sewage and maternal and infant welfare. The Institutes tried to influence decisions made and to overcome the resistance to funds to be allocated at a local level. The Federation sought to educate their members in citizenship and individual institutes entered competitions on the subject set up by the National Council of Women. In the inter-war era WI members, individuals with a background in suffrage activities, wartime volunteering or political influence all began to flex their political power suggesting a growing sense of entitlement and confidence in women's political issues.

III

Academic writing has in recent years begun to explore the regional and class variations in the paths women took to citizenship before and after 1918, but rural women have received less attention.⁶⁰ Worcestershire was not known for strong support for women's suffrage, and there were no militant escapades. The supporters of Mrs Pankhurst's Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) from the county, including Elsie Howey and Lady Isabel Margesson, were most active beyond the county borders. The Church League for Women's Suffrage had strong presence in the Cathedral city of Worcester and there was also a very active branch of the Anti-suffrage League in the county from 1909.⁶¹ The president was the Countess of Coventry of Croome Park, whose family was involved in a wide range of wartime charities and

activities. Her daughter-in-law, Lady Deerhurst, was, as we have already seen, chair of the Women's War Agricultural Committee, encouraged women to work on the land and supported the setting up the WIs across the county.

Many of the wartime charities and the activities to increase and preserve the food supply enabled pro and anti suffrage women, pacifist and patriotic women to work together on shared endeavours whilst legitimating their entry into the public sphere and laying the foundation for a new post-war women's politics. When Mrs Fawcett, the leader of the National Federation of Women's Suffrage Societies visited Worcester in 1915, not only did her speech suggest that the 'wider the franchise the less would be the chance of wanton declaration of war' she also encouraged women to undertake charitable and welfare work for the duration of the war.⁶² Many rural women in the county voluntarily gave their time to the war effort in a multitude of ways including the Women's Institutes and the Women's War Agricultural Committees. They also quietly, efficiently and unassumingly supported one or more of the eighteen thousands of charities set-up across the country during the conflict intent upon relieving distress or supporting the armed forces.⁶³

At county level there were over thirty convalescence hospitals needing support and staff, but even within the first month of the conflict, newspapers reported a flurry of charitable activities in the county. They stated that in Upton – upon – Seven: 'work parties are being held at the Rectory to make useful garments for the sailors and soldiers at the front', while in Droitwich one middle – class housewife organised twice weekly meetings to make garments for soldiers which were held in her home.⁶⁴ Such activities took place alongside a general trend that emerged over the course of the war, for more

centralised organisational structures to take over from ad hoc volunteerism. It was not just charities that required volunteers, the growth of wartime administration and organization meant that committees and meetings expanded as the government sought to increasingly cajole, encourage or legislate to control people's everyday life. Many of these committees had openings for women and enabled them to wield some power and influence in the public domain whilst developing skills and confidence. Within months of the outbreak of war, women were involved in providing assistance to Belgium Refugees, organizing workshops for the Queen's Work for Women Fund or creating garments for the Regimental Comforts Funds. The determination to avoid repetition and waste, which sometimes occurred when individuals were left to their own devices when undertaking patriotic work, led to new structures and committees. Across the board women organised, administered managed, coordinated, fund-raised, chaired meetings and spoke in public.

There is controversy amongst historians about the motivations and the significance of such voluntary activities. Arthur Marwick's description of the 'greatest flowering of grand-scale private charity more suitable to the world of Blandings Castle than to the waging of modern war' is a little harsh, as Simon Fowler has pointed out it was not just the upper and middle classes who were involved in charitable work.⁶⁵ For some women voluntary work fulfilled a patriotic duty, others found it made them feel useful, connected them to their loved ones, or was a way to deal with grief or loneliness. As Jacqueline de Vries argues, a number of wealthy women were already 'imbued with leadership skills, civic consciousness, and a commitment to service' from a range of pre-war voluntary activities.⁶⁶ But wartime activities enabled women

to re-work, re-negotiate or at least stretch ideas of what were appropriate feminine concerns and behavior and perhaps just as importantly developing confidence in female-only or at least female-dominated cultural spaces. In the inter-war Britain as Eve Colpus argues there was 'a newly calibrated ideal of service that emphasized the mutuality of self-fulfillment and community development, not self-sacrifice or neglect of the self.'⁶⁷ Self-fulfillment which Worcestershire women found in the network of volunteering activities they undertook.

The biographies of Worcestershire women suggests that many upper and middle class women with servants to look after the day-to-day running of their homes were not connected to a single organisation, but rather volunteered and organised across a number of groups, tied up with church state and community. Women who had been active in suffrage societies had already developed skills in organizing and working with other women during years of campaigning and had a finely tuned sense of their place within the nation. To some the next step to war service may have seemed easy. Mary Pakington was an active supporter of the non-militant National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) was chosen to give the vote of thanks when their leader Mrs Fawcett visited Worcester in 1915.⁶⁸ She became a strong supporter of the Queen's Work for Women Fund, and worked as a Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse at Hartlebury Castle Convalescence hospital. She was also one of many women who took on the role of being a boy scouts leader, when the Scouting movement sought to replace men who had enlisted, whilst her enthusiasm for village drama included staging an extravaganza 'Shakespeare For Merry England' in 1915.⁶⁹ She became the

secretary of the Women's War Agricultural Committee and advocated strongly in support of women working on the land arguing 'the work was as important as making munitions', and took an active role in the distribution of 870 lots of Canadian granulated sugar to the residents of the Pershore District in 1917, to enable housewives to make jam.⁷⁰ Pakington also became involved in the Women's Institute Movement and was on the Worcestershire County Federation Executive, initially responsible for propaganda work and promoting village drama and music. In post-war era she became a prolific writer of published plays, suitable for performance by amateur groups including: *Three Plays – Plays for Villages* (1926) *The House with Twisty Windows* (1926) set during the Russian Revolution and *All Camouflage: an episode of the war in one act* (1931) and a very active member of the Conservative party.

Many of the Worcestershire women who were wartime volunteers were over thirty, and comfortably off and hence beneficiaries of the Representation of the People Act in 1918. Nevertheless there was anxiety about how many women would actually vote in the 1918. Women had had the right to vote in local elections since the 1870s but many chose not to exercise this right, some claiming they avoided politics as they did not want to 'engender arguments with their neighbours'.⁷¹ But on the 14 December 1918, according to newspapers, women voters 'appeared at the booths in the morning in far greater numbers than men, and in several instances they found installed lady poll clerks'.⁷² The women voted but they had a negligible role as politicians in the years that followed. Very few Worcestershire women were elected to the local councils and Worcestershire did not elect a woman MP until 1997. But these rural women's did rework and extend the politics of

domesticity in relation to clusters of themes of significance to women: local communities and politics, housing, water, infant and maternal welfare.⁷³ It was often about practical actions as well as individual and collective campaigning on issues of significance to women. The ideas of citizenship articulated by the leaders of women's movements like the National Federation of the Women's Institutes were not part of the discourse of the membership on the ground in Worcestershire who instead were involved in more practical activities, for example during the 1926 Miners Strike, Pershore WI members sent parcels to miners wives.⁷⁴

New public roles, which opened up in the wake of the Sex Disqualification Removal Act 1919, were slowly and patchily embraced in Worcestershire. In March 1918, Mrs Fawcett had discussed the 'exhilaration of feeling the power of the vote behind them' and argued for the introduction of women magistrates and women sitting on juries.⁷⁵ In Worcestershire it was WSPU supporting suffragette, Lady Isabel Margesson, who had chaired a meeting in Glasgow where Mrs Pankhurst was arrested amidst scenes of a riot, who became one Worcestershire's first magistrates in December 1921. A role which, as Anne Logan argues, provided an 'opportunity to make an immediate impact upon the system of justice'.⁷⁶

Lady Isabel Margesson, from Barnt Green in the North of the County, was a mother of five children, who had originally been a member of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies; she had also spoken in support of the Women's Tax Resistance League. In wartime she was involved with the Women's Volunteer Reserve that schooled women in drill and encouraged voluntary work, set up a day nursery, encouraged rural

industries.⁷⁷ She was on the Women's War Agricultural Committee, founded the first Women's Institute in Worcestershire and became a member of both the County and National Executive Committees of the movement. In the post-war era she also campaigned against vivisection, and joined the first women MPs, Nancy Astor and Margaret Wintringham, in supporting the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child and in campaigns for women police.

In her role as a Voluntary County Organiser for the Worcestershire Women's Institutes Lady Isabel Margesson gave talks across Worcestershire in the inter-war era and apparently demonstrated how to re-heel and sole boots to many members, including those in Pershore. This local WI Committee contained a number of number of doctors' wives and trained nurses and in wartime had focused on infant welfare amongst other areas of charitable work. As Anna Davin has pointed out, infant and child welfare became an area of concern due to poor fitness of recruits to the Boer War at the turn of the twentieth century.⁷⁸ Apprehension about the loss of young men on the battlefield was linked to infant mortality when the Bishop of London pointed out that nine soldiers but twelve babies died every hour in 1915.⁷⁹ Women, from across the political spectrum, including Sylvia Pankhurst the pacifist and Communist leader of the East London Federation of Suffragettes, became involved in attempts not only preserve infant life but also to improve the health of children.⁸⁰ Pershore WI embraced National Baby Week from 1917 and other campaigns in the years that followed. When the WI hall was opened in October 1921, it became a social hub for folk dancing, keep fit classes and a library but also a venue for infant and maternal welfare clinics.

WI members assisted the district nurse in giving advice to attendees. In time a pram shelter was built behind the hall so that mothers did not have to lug a heavy pram up a flight of stairs when attending the clinics.⁸¹ The membership's commitment to women's health in a pre-NHS era also led to collections of silver paper for the Worcester Maternity Fund, which provided a trained midwife to women in labour and donating 250 eggs a month for Pershore Cottage Hospital.

There were huge variations in the provision of infant and maternal welfare services during the First World War and its aftermath and a consequent variation in infant and maternal mortality, with the latter rising during the inter-war years.⁸² There was also a wide divergence in the care that women received in labour and in the inter-war years it was the National Birthday Fund for Maternity Services that gained support from Worcestershire women Lady Hindlip and the Countess of Plymouth, who had been active in the formation of Worcestershire County Federation of Women's Institutes in wartime. The organisation's vice-chair was Lucy Baldwin who lived near Bewdley in North Worcestershire where her husband, who became leader the Conservative party and Prime Minister, was the MP. Lucy Baldwin had supported women's suffrage and been the commandant of Wilden Red Cross Convalescence Hospital in Stourport-on-Severn in wartime. In the 1920s and 1930s she campaigned for better maternity services and analgesics to be available to all women in childbirth, whatever their financial resources; a campaign that the WI supported in the interwar years. She had given birth to seven children and in 1930 wrote to the British Medical Journal, pointing out the social divisions around childbirth and the 'penalty of suffering' that was

experienced by women who could not afford to pay for an anesthetist. She implored readers of the *British Medical Journal* to protest 'that every mother should be entitled to anesthetic if she wishes it' and likened women giving birth to men going into battle, uncertain if they would survive.⁸³ She became the driving force behind the 1936 Midwifery Act which established local authority responsibility to provide a midwifery service. Here was an example of what Helen Jones has described as a 'group of women not personally affected by misfortune' but who understood the gendered impact of poverty' and took action to get women's issues on the political agenda.⁸⁴

IV

Research into different but inter-related messy, local histories of rural women can offer ways to begin to unpick or at least stretch some of the national narratives of women during the First World War and the years that followed. For some women in Worcestershire the conflict brought tragedy and loss, for others opportunity. Some seem to have felt more confident, more entitled, perhaps more visible after they had contributed to wartime food production and volunteered for wartime activities and gained the suffrage. In the inter-war era women's politics sometimes operated above and across traditional allegiances, traversing some of the pre-war divisions amongst women. In many of the activities and campaigns that emerged, there was a complex intermingling of local issues, gender and class politics played out in the home, community, women's organisations and individual's involvement in national campaigns. But the particularities of Worcestershire in terms of politics,

agricultural and organisations are not those of other parts of the country. It is to be hoped that in the aftermath of the First World War centenary further work will be undertaken to use, extend and compare some of the local histories that have been uncovered.

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