

LOOKING BACK

2020
REFLECTIONS
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2020
OVER 150 YEARS

issue 3

Women Freemasons and Wartime Relief Work

RW Bro (Dr) Ann Pilcher, PJGW, GM'sGS



FREEMASONS' HALL

ARTHUR SQUARE

Since 1st November 1867



WOMEN FREEMASONS AND WARTIME RELIEF WORK

The Masonic principles of support, care and relief were evident during the First World War. The number of women Freemasons belonging to the three relevant organisations in this country at the outbreak of the Great War was to be reckoned in terms of a few hundreds. The number of women belonging to the Honourable Fraternity of Antient Masonry (now the Order of Women Freemasons) to the end of 1914 was 147. The group of women who seceded from the HFAM in 1913 to form the Honourable Fraternity of Ancient Freemasons would have not had a chance to independently gain many more members in just over a year. There are no figures for the female membership of the Co-Masons (now Le Droit Humain) over the same time but it is unlikely to have been many more than that number. This means that there would have been probably no more than 350 women Masons throughout the country.

The fact that several of the major support agencies working during the war were set up by women who were also Freemasons is therefore statistically significant. This work was not done by women who co-incidentally were Freemasons, but by women whose belief in the idea of service inherent in Freemasonry prompted them to demonstrate this by taking practical action in creating major initiatives for the relief and support of both participants and home workers during the War.

EVELINA HAVERFIELD

One of these ladies was the Hon Evelina Haverfield, daughter of the 3rd Baron Abinger, was a prominent suffragette, having taken part in demonstrations, been arrested and imprisoned. She was a member of Lodge Golden Rule No. 21 of the Co-Masons, a Lodge which had been founded in 1905 by Annie Besant. The Lodge's name reflects its aspirations - 'do unto others as you would be done by' - the golden rule of brotherhood. The founders intended the Lodge to be of service to humanity.

A well-known horsewoman, she was a mounted marshal in the 1910 suffrage protest procession and was put in prison following the 'Black Friday' demonstration, when she deliberately led the police horses out of their ranks. According to Sylvia Pankhurst, 'When first she joined the Suffragette movement her expression was cold and proud; one felt that bitterness, rather than love, was the impelling motive of her militancy ... During her years in the Suffrage movement her sympathies so broadened that she seemed to have undergone a rebirth'.



Evelina Haverfield was instrumental in forming the Woman's Emergency Corps, the Woman's Volunteer Reserve; and the Green Cross Corps (the women's ambulance reserve). She initiated the idea which eventually materialised in the Woman's Army Corps of the later years of the war – the WAAC, the WRNS and the WRAF.

The earliest proposal, the Women's Emergency Corps, came into existence in August 1914 through the efforts of Decima Moore (formerly a singer and actress with the D'Oyly Carte Company) and Evelina Haverfield, who seized the opportunity provided by the crisis to organise a role for women. It was soon joined by many upper and middle class women and was in the early days an unlikely mix of feminists and women who would not normally have mixed with such dangerous types. They became involved in several ventures, not least of which was in providing until 1918 a uniformed group called the Lady Instructors Signals Company, who trained Aldershot army recruits in signalling. However the majority of the work was largely of a domestic, fund-raising nature.

The Women's Volunteer Reserve was formed in August 1914 as an offshoot of the Women's Emergency Corps. Haverfield became Honorary Colonel of the WVR, with the Marchioness of Londonderry as Honorary Colonel in Chief. The WVR adopted a clear military structure, with battalions, officers, NCOs, other ranks, parades, drills and saluting. Members wore khaki, uniforms that acted as a template for other subsequent women's services. Coinciding with widespread male enlistment, the adoption of khaki aligned the WVR with men in defending Britain, its values and way of life. The aim of the WVR was to train a body of fit, disciplined women who could undertake a range of tasks in support of the civil powers, including signalling, first aid, crowd control, driving, delivering messages and domestic duties.

Haverfield went on to work in Serbia, founding the Serbian Soldiers Comforts Fund, the Fund for Disabled Serbian Soldiers and setting up an orphanage. Her personal papers were taken to Canada by her son and material from these was subsequently used in a biography by Boyce Gaddes.

MABEL ST CLAIR STOBART

Mabel St Clair Stobart was the daughter of Sir Samuel Boulton, 1st Bt., merchant and contractor. Very much grounded in the idea of service, she was 'an ardent feminist, who believed in the potential wartime usefulness of women and that the reward of proving their national worthiness would be enfranchisement'. In 1907 she formed the Women's Sick and Wounded Convoy Corps to serve between field and base hospitals in the first Balkan War and in 1914 the Women's



National Service League to provide assistance at home and abroad, including France, Belgium and Serbia. This included women doctors, trained nurses, cooks, interpreters, and all workers essential for the independent working of a hospital of war.

She converted to Spiritualism, leading that community during the 1920s. Spiritualism was another of the spiritual quests, like Theosophy, which became popular, particularly with upper and middle class women, from the late nineteenth century. Stobart became a member of Lodge Golden Rule No. 1 of HFAM.

FLORENCE BURLEIGH LEACH AND LUCY, LADY MARKHAM

Although egalitarian and non-political in principle, the WVR's military structure and the cost of the uniform (over two pounds) meant that it largely attracted middle and upper class recruits and encouraged the formation of a more accessible organisation. The Women's Legion was founded by Lady Londonderry and Mrs. Florence Burleigh Leach, later to become Dame Florence. Mrs Leach was initiated into Lodge Golden Rule No. 1 of the HFAM in October 1910, being seconded by Dr. Cobb [the one and only male Grand Master]. Her war service involved the expansion of the Women's Legion and the subsequent formation of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, the members of which relieved many thousands of men in France from non-combatant tasks to front-line duty. She proposed six of her senior officers into Lodge Golden Rule.

During the war Florence Leach had worked with Lucy O'Hea (then Lady Markham) and it was through their friendship that O'Hea was proposed into Lodge Harmony in 1923 – she was to become Grand Master in 1938. Her first husband was Sir Arthur Markham, a colliery owner and Liberal MP for Mansfield, Notts., who was rewarded with a baronetcy by Asquith in 1911. Sylvia Pankhurst wrote of him: 'Sir Arthur Markham, who, next to Keir Hardie, was the most persistent opponent of the "Cat and Mouse" Bill, dubbed it "mean, cruel, unworthy of the House of Commons and framed with diabolical ingenuity"'.

Towards the end of the war and after the death of Sir Arthur, Lucy, Lady Markham was active in looking after the interests of women in the services. With Margaret Lloyd George, wife of the Prime Minister, she set up the first residential Women's Active Service Club in Eaton Square, London in 1917 for women on leave from overseas. There was one house for officers and one for the rank and file. Accommodation and meals were provided for a nominal amount. In a letter to the Morning Post and other newspapers, the two founders appealed for funds in order to extend the idea to the provinces - 'So far the initial expenses have been borne, for the greater part, by a few patriotic ladies and gentlemen who have the welfare of these noble women at heart'.



THE UNITED SUFFRAGISTS AND THE WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE NATIONAL AID CORPS

In January 1914 there were fifty three different suffrage organisations. Diversity did not necessarily mean strength; resources tended often to be spread too thinly; militancy was unacceptable to many. The United Suffragists was formed in February 1914 and aimed to be a totally inclusive suffrage body. It was open to both men and women, was non-party and adopted only passive militancy such as heckling. As a unifying organisation, it was recognised by the government and included in negotiations on a possible suffrage bill: as such the United Suffragists was an important agency and the only one which supported suffrage activity during the War. The other main organisations declared a moratorium for the duration. Giving their support as Vice Presidents were such Freemasons as the Rev. Dr Cobb, the Hon. Mrs Haverfield and Mr and Mrs Baillie-Weaver.

The United Suffragists undertook no war relief work themselves, but supported Evelina Haverfield's Women's Emergency Corps. Votes for Women, founded and owned by Mr and Mrs Pethick-Lawrence, had ceased to be the official paper of the WSPU and was given to the United Suffragists as a medium for educating the public.

Charlotte Despard and the Women's Freedom League were quick to establish a relief organisation at the beginning of the War. 'The National Executive Committee of the Women's Freedom League re-affirms the urgency of keeping the suffrage flag flying ... and in view of the earnest desire prevalent in the ranks of Suffragists to render service to their country at this critical time ... are organising a Women's Suffrage National Aid Corps, whose chief object will be to render help to the women and children of the nation'. Despard was President of the Corps. They set up clinics for expectant and nursing mothers, provided meals for school children, clothes for the poor and workrooms where unemployed women and girls could learn to make clothes and soft toys.

RW Bro (Dr) Ann Pilcher, PJGW, GM'sGS
The Order of Women Freemasons
www.owf.org.uk

www.arthursquare.org

T: 028 9023 4556

E: info@arthursquare.org



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