A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON WOMEN WORKERS IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR: THE INDUSTRIAL DIARY OF KATHLEEN CHURCH-BLISS AND ELSIE WHITEMAN

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This article is based on the experiences of two women who gave up a comfortable life in the Surrey countryside to work in an aircraft component factory during the Second World War. Kathleen Church-Bliss and Elsie Whiteman wrote an extensive diary during their time at Morrison’s in Croydon. This article aims to shed light on a hitherto neglected group; the older woman worker, and in particular, the older single woman. The Church-Bliss diary reveals how dilution arrangements in Britain during the Second World War were made to ensure that women working in previously male preserves were prevented from achieving any sort of equality with male workers in the same part of the production process. The diary also provides a detailed and intimate account of the way in which the wartime circumstances helped to bring about welfare improvements inside the factory, which was in turn assisted by the creation of a works council.

Public memory of women’s contribution to the war effort quickly faded in the post war years. It was not until the late 1960s, with the revival of a mass feminist movement and the emergence of a new social history, that women workers of both world wars began to be claimed for historical discourse. The first sustained, detailed work on the impact of the war on women, by Penny Summerfield, argued that the war had not produced any significant long-term change for women workers. More emphasis was given to continuity than change and writers such as the Higonnets stressed that whatever gains women appeared to make in relation to men in warfare were in fact illusory as they always remained in a subordinate position in the gender hierarchy.

A key aspect of the new feminist history of the 1970s and beyond was the publication of authentic women’s testimony. The desire for ‘second wave’ feminists to read about the struggles of previous generations of women led to the publication of many classic accounts of women’s lives. It also generated a great interest in oral testimony and the publication of several oral history texts relating to women. More recently, Dorothy Sheridan has raised the possibility of applying concepts developed by the Popular Memory Group to
memories of women in the Second World War. Sheridan argues that the merit of this perspective is that it ‘accepts the integrity of the interviewee but looks at the cultural contexts which mould and influence their testimonies’. Penny Summerfield has developed this concept further in her recent study which attempts to examine the relationship between women’s subjective wartime identities and cultural representations of women’s lives in the Second World War. Using both feminist theory and ideas of popular memory to analyse her oral testimony, Summerfield aims to shed light on the issue of how the war affected gender identities and gender relations. This article seeks to evaluate new evidence about women workers in the Second World War which sheds light on a hitherto neglected group; the older woman worker, and in particular, the older single woman. In so doing it will, hopefully, complement recent historiography on this topic, particularly the work of Summerfield, which has focused so much on oral testimony. The article also aims to contribute to our understanding of gender relations as a whole in wartime, and industrial relations at the micro level.

Summerfield in her oral history research interviewed elderly women who, by definition, were young in the Second World War. The median date of birth of her respondents was 1922 and with one exception they were all born between 1918 and 1927. What she has reconstructed, therefore, is young women’s lives in wartime, but the limitations of this approach were not fully explored. By reconstructing women’s lives from oral accounts Summerfield has overlooked the experiences of older women no longer available to give their testimony. This group of women war workers was, in fact, crucial to the war effort. The number of women in paid employment in Britain expanded to 7,258,000 by 1943. This represented an increase of over two million on the pre-war figure. The Wartime Social Survey of 1943 found that the largest group of women entering the wartime workforce were those over thirty-five. The Mass Observation report People in Production extolled the virtues of the older woman worker who was very often keen to make a personal contribution to the war effort.

Looking for documentary sources on women’s consciousness in the Second World War there is clearly a gap in relation to women workers. Mass Observation and government social surveys are useful. It must be remembered, however, that women’s testimony in these reports has been mediated by middle class, educated researchers. There are a number of women’s wartime diaries, but these were all written by women who were full-time housewives. Unlike land army, service and nursing women, the unmediated voices of women industrial workers in the war are largely absent. Long factory hours, often extended by compulsory overtime, were not conducive to writing. In any case, factory women often lacked the formal education required for meaningful literary expression. The lack of interest and recognition of the role of women workers in the war during the post war years may also have made women feel that their memoirs and diaries were not worthy of entry into the public domain of ‘history’. This absence has acted to reinforce the role of oral testimony in efforts to understand the experiences of wartime women workers. This testimony is, of course, incredibly valuable, but one should be very cautious about over generalizing from the experiences of women from very specific age cohorts.

**Genesis of the Church-Bliss and Whiteman Diaries**

It is particularly significant, therefore, that a very large manuscript has recently come to light of two women munitions workers who kept an extensive joint diary from February
1942 to November 1944. Diaries (and any sort of autobiographical material) need to be viewed critically. The vast majority of working people did not keep diaries or make any attempt to record their experiences. The diarist, especially the manual labouring diarist, is highly atypical. At the time of embarking on war work in 1942 Elsie Whiteman was forty-seven and Kathleen Church-Bliss forty-two. Whiteman and Church-Bliss were far removed from the usual woman war worker of their age; they were not married and they were middle class. Their class separated the two women from their work mates. However, against this, one can argue that the two women worked from early 1942 until the end of the war on the shop floor, living close to the factory in rented rooms, as did most of their fellow workers. Although they had privileged backgrounds, they lived very much as workers in these years. Obviously the Church-Bliss and Whiteman diary is coloured by the class perspective and cultural milieu of the writers, but as long as it is read, like any other historical evidence, with care and in conjunction with other sources, it provides a valuable insight into the experience of older women war workers.

Kathleen Church-Bliss, a descendent of Sir Charles Barry, architect of the Houses of Parliament, was born in 1900 into an affluent, professional family in London. The family was based in Chelsea, but spent long interludes elsewhere. She had no siblings, but was close to her many cousins on her mother’s side. At thirteen Kathleen became a boarder at Wycombe Abbey School, where her grandfather was chairman of the governors. Despite being extremely bright she did not go on to university and appears to have been destined to stay at home with her demanding mother, particularly after her father died in 1923. She found an outlet, however, in folk dancing and became heavily involved with the English Folk Dance Society; ‘All these lovely new friends and the glorious music became my life.’

Elsie Whiteman was five years older than Kathleen. Photographs of the pair reveal that Elsie was tall, slender and graceful, whereas Kathleen was shorter and had a more rounded and homely appearance. Elsie was the daughter of a successful businessman and was brought up in Elgin Crescent, Notting Hill. She had three sisters and two brothers, one of whom was killed in the First World War. After being privately educated, Elsie trained as a teacher at Queen Alexandra House, London, in ‘PT’ (presumably Physical Training). Soon after she became heavily involved in folk dancing as a teacher and organizer.

The folk revival had its origins in the 1890s and was heavily influenced by Cecil Sharp who collected previously unpublished folk songs and dances which he promoted as remnants of a pre-industrial English culture. Elements within the movement which aimed to link the folk revival with Clarion socialism were defeated and the ‘Folk’ came to be firmly situated within the establishment. From 1907 Sharp concentrated more on dance than song, and folk dance was promoted by educationalists as a method of social control and imparting middle class values to working class children. Kathleen and Elsie, who came into the movement at its height in the period after the First World War, were typical folk dance instructors; upper middle class women with a solid conservative outlook. Instructors were only permitted to use a standard repertoire which had been defined by Sharp as ‘genuine and authentic’. Spontaneous singing and dancing at folk events was discouraged as it was seen as invariably tainted with the vulgarity of the music hall and could lead to a loss of control by the leadership.

Kathleen and Elsie met through the folk dance movement in 1927 and quickly became close and committed friends. They had a wide social circle, including men, but there is
no evidence of any romantic involvement with the opposite sex. We do not know whether
this was out of choice or necessity as the ‘society’ circles which the two women moved
in would have been particularly hit by the losses of the 1914–18 war, leaving a scarcity
of eligible young men. It would not be unusual for women ‘couples’ of their class in the
1920s to set up home together. Whilst nothing can be said with certainty about the exact
nature of the relationship between the two women, it does seem very much in the
tradition of a ‘romantic friendship.’

Both women had private incomes. Elsie still had to work, however, whilst Kathleen
did not have to take paid employment very seriously. In 1935 the pair embarked on a
new life together in Milford, Surrey, where Kathleen bought a Tudor farmhouse, Benacre.
The house was on the main road to Portsmouth and appears to have been bought partly
as a business proposition as they soon opened a teashop for passing motorists and cyclists.
This life continued until August 1941 when Kathleen and Elsie decided to close the
business, let out the house and go into munitions. The diary clearly demonstrates that this
decision was prompted by their increasing need to do something positive for the war
effort, but patriotism was not the only factor which came into play. No petrol allowances
were made for private consumption in the war so there must have been few cars travelling
down to the coast for outings. With so many men now in the forces, there were likely
to be few cyclists either. Equally, compulsory registration of women for war work, which
had started in April 1941, was gradually being extended to older age groups. So Kathleen
(more urgently) and Elsie realized that they would soon be required to do something.
Added to the equation is the influence of the folk dance. Kathleen and Elsie’s paid work
for the movement from the early 1920s to 1935 was not in any way socialist, and was
unlikely to have brought them into contact with working class people. Nonetheless, it
almost certainly helped to foster in them an increasing self-confidence and ability to direct
their own lives, break away from their respective extensive family networks, and take on
new challenges.

Together, these forces compelled the two women to volunteer for a government training
centre course in engineering, which they did with the proviso that they would train and
work together. It is not known why they chose this particular form of war work. Very
few women with similar backgrounds followed this course. A regular commitment to
Civil Defence or to the Women’s Voluntary Service would have been much easier and
would almost certainly have satisfied the authorities, yet they made a deliberate choice to
leave their home and comfortable surroundings to train for very demanding factory work.
The decision to keep a detailed record through the joint diary (which they took turns to
write each evening) seems to indicate that they felt they were embarking on something of
an adventure. According to Jane Saltisbury, Elsie Whiteman’s niece, Kathleen and Elsie
felt that by going into munitions they would be making the most effective contribution
to the war effort. Despite the age differences in the women concerned, there are obvious
parallels here between Church-Bliss and Whiteman and Summerfield’s respondents in
Reconstructing Women’s Wartime Lives. Summerfield divides her respondents into two basic
groups; ‘heroine’ volunteers who were consciously and proudly replacing men and ‘stoic’
conscripts who reluctantly got on with war work imposed on them, which was often
traditional ‘women’s work’, although they were sometimes pressed into transgressing
gender boundaries. The sense of adventure and the desire for public service appear very
comparable to Summerfield’s notion of the ‘heroic’ identity. They did not, however,
write about a conscious desire to cross gender boundaries. On the other hand, by choosing to go into the male world of engineering, rather than the Women’s Volunteer Service or other similar socially acceptable work for women of their class, they were in fact doing just that.

War work

The government’s decision to include women in the compulsory direction of labour was based on an urgent and pressing need to expand the country’s labour force, particularly in munitions where insufficient women had volunteered and untapped sources of male labour were rapidly being exhausted. The resultant rise in women workers in engineering is striking, especially in aircraft production where female labour rose from seven per cent of the workforce in 1935 to forty per cent in 1944, representing nearly three quarters of a million women. The expansion of female labour in engineering was fraught with difficulties, as the long tradition of highly organized male skilled labour had successfully resisted ‘dilution’ for many years in many sectors of the industry. At the same time it must be acknowledged that in the new consumer industries, which were based on more modern methods of mass production rather than the traditional craft skills, women were already making inroads before 1939. Employers welcomed this process of deskilling, favouring female labour for unskilled light assembly which was widely seen as cheap and undemanding. In wartime it was necessary to deploy female labour on other areas of the production process previously performed exclusively by men. The Associated Engineering Union (AEU), representing the skilled male labour force, realized that it could not realistically oppose this trend, but it did succeed in securing a number of agreements which controlled the terms of ‘dilution’ of skilled male labour.

The most important aspect of this was the stipulation that women ‘dilutees’ were to be regarded as temporary workers and registered as such; for the duration of the war only. Where women replaced men they could theoretically move to a position of the same pay as the equivalent male worker if they could work without extra supervision or assistance after a probationary period. In practice equal pay was very rarely achieved. Skilled men often acted to ensure that women could not be regarded as doing equivalent work. It was, of course, also in the employers’ interest to resist equal pay, as it would result in dramatically increased labour costs. So in many cases previously skilled work was broken down into smaller tasks and labelled unskilled or semi-skilled and paid according to women’s rates. Therefore, the majority of women in industry during the war worked at processes called ‘women’s work’ for ‘women’s pay rates’ which represented roughly half the wages of skilled male labour and two thirds the wage of unskilled men.

Training for war work

The Ministry of Labour channelled new recruits to industry into training centres where they would be given an introduction to engineering processes. By 1941 thirty-eight of these centres were in existence. Although initially the government opposed women entrants, this policy was reversed early in 1941 as recruitment needs were so pressing. During this period able women recruits were offered fairly extensive training which could
have opened up opportunities to progress to skilled work in industry.\textsuperscript{32} Employers, on the other hand, were deeply resistant towards female labour in any skilled capacity (even semi-skilled) and, in any case, they preferred to train workers on the job and were unwilling to release suitable personnel from production to staff the centres. By 1942, therefore, the emphasis had shifted more in favour of ‘machine minding’ for women on an unskilled basis. Some centres were closed, courses were shortened, and less theoretical instruction given (although there were still some specialist advanced courses available for a few women). For women workers this approach fitted in with the prevailing notion in industry that as women were only employed on a temporary basis there was no point in providing them with extensive training.

It took until the middle of February 1942 for Kathleen and Elsie to complete the arrangements for the move to Croydon. After a depressing search for accommodation they finally had to settle for two gloomy ‘cells’ at the top of a house. Their landlady told them that they were ‘not typical trainees’ and that the two women ‘ought to be supervisors.’\textsuperscript{33} They finally started at the training centre on 16 February 1942 on a course in Machine Operating although they had requested to do Fitting.\textsuperscript{34} Kathleen and Elsie started the course with a group of women who were all new to industry. These included an ex-shop girl, children’s nurse and housemaid. During the training, however, they mixed with many male trainees, including an ex-butler and an ex-police officer. Although this is not entirely clear from the diary, men and women trainees appeared to be doing the same courses. They certainly appear in the diary as doing identical work. Men and women were regarded differently by the staff though and had different expectations upon leaving.

The Machine Operating course was actually rather more complex than it sounded. Most of their time was taken up with practical tasks, with short talks every afternoon and the addition of a weekly long lecture. They learned about drilling, grinding, boring, planing, tapering, cutting screws and spent a lot of time cutting pieces of metal to exact sizes, for which they used a centre lathe. They also learned to operate a capstan lathe and the use of basic tools. Setting up the machines for different tasks required some mathematical ability, including trigonometry and geometry. Elsie and Kathleen managed this well, especially as they diligently practised at home, but several other women trainees, who undoubtedly had less formal education, had difficulties with the maths. This may have played a part in the decision to offer Elsie and Kathleen an extension of training from twelve to sixteen weeks, although another woman in their group also did sixteen weeks.\textsuperscript{35} The availability of the longer course seems surprising in view of the general winding down of formal training, but they may well have been among the last to go through the extended course. As it happened, the Waddon centre was closed down after only a month and they were transferred to the nearby (Croydon) centre to complete their training.\textsuperscript{36}

Elsie and Kathleen were not impressed by the management of the centre and made this clear in the diary. They described the Assistant Manager as a ‘dried up little horror’.\textsuperscript{37} Delays were common and the two women complained in the journal about waiting for a tool, waiting for a machine to become free, waiting for instruction, waiting for work or spending a long time setting up a machine only to be moved to another job. There were frequent changes of teacher and often the trainees did not seem to know what was going on. The quality of the teaching staff was extremely varied, as one would expect with the priority given to production rather than formal training.
The course involved three practical tests, which killed Kathleen and Elsie with anxiety, although this soon began to dissipate when they realized that it was common for staff to help both men and women trainees and that the marks awarded did not seem to have much correlation with the work done. By the beginning of May they had decided that the ‘whole test system was a farce’ and that ‘in common with everyone else we no longer have any conscience about tests.’ Even with help some trainees failed a test, usually because they had taken much longer than the allotted time for the work. Both men and women were given the same standard tests and both appear to have been given similar assistance to get through them.

Kathleen and Elsie threw themselves into the training with enormous enthusiasm. After the first week the diary records that they were ‘enthralled and happy’. Socially, they appear to have fitted in well. They were delighted to be accepted by fellow trainees and pleased to note that their ‘Kensington voices don’t seem to have excited comment’. They found industrial life very agreeable and pronounced their fellow trainees as ‘an extraordinarily nice crowd’, although they found that they had to get used to their ‘abrupt and terse phraseology.’ Kathleen, who was the more extrovert, appears to have been the most enthusiastic about their new life, whilst there are hints that Elsie was not quite so happy. They took an interest in the welfare of their fellow trainees and offered friendly advice and assistance when one became seriously ill. They also took more than a passing interest in ‘factory gossip’ and were astonished at the lengths which the women went to with their appearance, particularly their hair. As the course progressed they became particularly friendly with Bert, a fellow trainee, and ‘Gawge’, a teacher whose unhappy home life featured in the diary. Socially Kathleen and Elsie seem more inclined towards the men in the centre than the women, but this was always on a strictly platonic level. Overall they adjusted to life in Croydon very well. They still managed to see friends and family some weekends and even the occasional evening.

As the training course drew towards a close Kathleen and Elsie were interviewed by the ‘Placing Officer’ to organize their future employment. Having stipulated that they wished to be placed together they took up the offer of a joint interview at nearby Morrison’s engineering works. The interview proceeded smoothly and they accepted the offer of employment. Bert warned them beforehand not to accept the wage offered, but they appear to have taken little notice of this and record simply that the ‘the pay is not all good’. The basic wage was to be made up with bonus earnings which they were dubious about. They also felt aggrieved at the prospect of buying their overalls from their own precious coupon allowance. Kathleen and Elsie left the training centre on 30 May. To the bewilderment of both trainees and management, they thanked the Chief Instructor, saying that they had ‘so much enjoyed the course’ and left with a great flurry of smiles and handshakes all round.

Gender and the engineering factory — work at Morrison’s

Morrison’s was a contractor for Vickers of Weybridge, Surrey and was dependent on government contracts to Vickers for aeroplanes. The factory made parts for Spitfires, Hurricanes, Welliingtons and Lancasters. Before the war the factory employed about 130 workers. This soon shot up to around 500. The rapid expansion in aircraft manufacture
during the 1930s had already eroded the position of the skilled man and this process was accelerated by the demands of war. According to Ken Peters, who worked in the machine shop with Kathleen and Elsie, there were no men in Morrison’s who had completed the traditional lengthy apprenticeship in engineering. Men were expected to learn on the job and were accepted as skilled when they could work independently at the speed required. Before the war, Peters informs us, the only women workers at Morrison’s were in assembly.

Men such as Peters were categorized as being in ‘reserved occupations’ at the start of the war and as such were prevented from either joining the forces or moving to another job. This kept the existing male workforce in the factory, but it did not overcome the pressing problem of finding the extra labour needed to meet the factory’s necessary expansion. The deficit was made up largely by taking on women from the training centres. Elsie and Kathleen (Bliss as she dropped ‘Church’ in the factory) joined the machine shop, where there were about fifty workers, as centre lathe operators. Women were also employed as capstan lathe operators and in other parts of the factory from which they had previously been excluded. Although we have no accurate figures, it appears that by the end of 1942 over half the workforce at Morrison’s were women. Despite the appearance of equality, distinctions were made both in pay, status and job description to separate male and female workers in all the work processes. Men were also required to work longer hours than the women. In the machine shop women were not required to set up their machines before each job. This had to be done by the ‘setter’ (officially toolsetter), but male centre lathe turners set up their own machines. Normally Stan Wallace was Kathleen and Elsie’s setter. In time both women became experienced enough to set up their own work (they certainly had some experience of this at the training centre), but Stan would help if they ran into difficulties and he remained responsible for their work.

This subordination to the setter was the key to the inferior position of the women in the machine shop. It was reinforced by the management who tended to work through the male hierarchy rather than deal directly with the women themselves. This hierarchy, consisting of charge hands, foreman and the ever-present inspectors, together maintained standards and the flow of work. The fact that male workers were directly responsible for their work to this hierarchy, whereas setters took responsibility for female workers, made women’s position analogous to juvenile labour. The difference was, of course, that, unlike boys, women workers could never graduate to full status once they had learned the job and they were only tolerated on a temporary ‘for the duration’ basis.

The standard week at Morrison’s was forty-eight hours, including a short Saturday. Compulsory overtime was frequent, sometimes creating a working day of over eleven hours. Kathleen and Elsie found overtime disagreeable, but seemed to accept weekday overtime much more readily than Sunday working which they loathed. In the early part of their employment the women worked night shifts, but this was discontinued in early 1943. Pay for women in the machine shop started at 1s. 1d. an hour plus bonus and was later raised to 1s. 3d. Bonus and overtime earnings meant that weekly wages varied considerably, but Kathleen and Elsie appear to have earned £4-5 a week, which they referred to as ‘charwoman’s wage’. Their male work mates on the centre lathes would expect to earn considerably more than this, although Kathleen and Elsie never refer to this fact in the diary. The only explicit reference to male wage rates was when a young
man called Fred was acting as charge hand. Annoyed as he had been 'so abominably disagreeable', they refer to him as 'the wretched boy' and report with obvious disgust that he was being paid 2s. 4d. an hour. There is no evidence for any sort of equal pay agitation by the women in the factory during the war. It just seems to have been accepted that men and women would have different pay rates. There is, however, considerable evidence of shop floor challenges to women's bonus rates for different jobs as determined by the 'rate fixer', some of which were successful.

After only a few weeks at the factory Kathleen and Elsie adopted the view that the women at Morrison's fell into two broad groups; a 'bunch of nice middle aged grannies — with kindly worn faces and amiable manners' and 'a horde of ghastly looking wantons with long golden locks — and buffet erections on top — and enamelled faces'. This latter group spent a great deal of time (their own and the firm's) in the ladies cloakrooms. The management took counter measures such as removing the mirrors and towels. Kathleen and Elsie were convinced that the older women (who, of course, included themselves) were the best workers. When Stan told them that the four older women in the section were the 'better workers' this was proudly reported in the diary that evening.

The practice of allowing married women a week's leave whenever their husband's came home on leave (which could be as much as four times a year) was regarded by Kathleen and Elsie as grossly unfair as single women were only entitled to one week a year. Despite these divisions the women rallied together when faced with management, especially over questions such as rate fixing and bonus payments.

Relations between men and women in the workforce appear to have been varied. Whilst the mature men mostly enjoyed good relations with the women, there were, as we saw above, occasional signs of tension between the women and the younger men. Resentment over their higher earnings must have played a part in this. Ken Peters reports that although there were 'little undercurrents' in the factory about women 'taking men's jobs', overall the new women workers were accepted because everyone knew that there were no men available to take the jobs being created to meet the government contracts. Although this acceptance did not stretch to equality, many of the men were kind and helpful towards the women. Kathleen and Elsie referred to the four millwrights as 'our devoted slaves, always ready to do anything for us' and with whom they shared many jokes. They also found Len Quirk a 'most considerate chargehand and most anxious to look after the bonus earnings of his girls.' Stan, who was also promoted to chargehand, was the real favourite though. He took up the cause of the women when expected bonuses did not appear and Kathleen and Elsie felt that there was a 'contented atmosphere' when he was in charge.

Summerfield's account of her respondents' unflattering depiction of wartime civilian male workers as unfit, incompetent, unconscientious and not 'real men' compared to men in the armed forces, is generally not reflected in the diary. Kathleen and Elsie were generally positive and supportive towards fellow workers. When they did make disparaging remarks about a work mate this was just as likely to apply to a woman as to a man. The only aspect of Summerfield's account of wartime masculinity which strikes a chord at Morrison's is with the diarists' portrayal of management incompetence. Even so, there is never any hint that any of the men at Morrison's were somehow inferior because they were not on active service. It may be that much depended on the industrial make up of
different areas. In Croydon the emphasis on light industry meant that it was quite common for men to be designated into ‘reserved occupations’ and therefore barred from military service.  

Elsie and Kathleen had little time for what they described as ‘a most awful collection of bosses’. When foremen, managers and directors were standing together in discussion on the factory floor they were likened to a ‘group of vultures’. Mr Hurst, the works manager, was ‘King Vulture and is cordially disliked by everyone’. The managing director, Mr Proctor, was portrayed as ‘having the appearance of a well scrubbed pig’. The two women also took objection to the ‘petty tyranny’ of the management such as when mirrors were removed from the cloakrooms. The fact that Kathleen and Elsie identified so readily with their fellow workers, rather than the managers who were closer to their own class, obviously helped them to gain acceptance on the shop floor. In wartime there was a lot more social mixing than previously and this was not questioned if the people concerned were volunteering for the war effort and prepared to work ‘for the duration’.

Both Church-Bliss and Whiteman were keen to join a trade union and duly became members of the General and Municipal Workers Union in November 1942. They were appalled at the furtive manner in which the assistant shop steward received their subscriptions; ‘she evidently lives in fear of the firm’s gestapo’. It is likely that the title ‘assistant shop steward’ was given to women as they were denied full shop steward status. During 1942 the AEU backed down from its previous stand against women members and voted to create a special category of members for women and girls. Kathleen and Elsie were keen to transfer to the AEU and this was accomplished in February 1943. The women were impressed by the union’s strength and noted that ‘there seems to be a lot of very able men in the AEU’. They were also rather frightened by its enormous potential for industrial disruption and greatly relieved when their branch voted against sending support for a strike of engineers in Newcastle.

The works council

On 12 March 1943 a notice appeared in the factory announcing the formation of a works council. The decision of the management at Morrison’s to initiate joint consultation was very much in keeping with the rest of industry at this time. Communists and other militants in industry were initially opposed to joint committees as they opposed co-operation with management of any sort. The entry of the Soviet Union into the war in May 1941 and the need to maximize effort for the ‘second front’ reversed this policy. Management were also initially not keen on joint consultation, as it would undermine their authority. They too were brought round by the realization that supplies of untapped labour were approaching exhaustion so output could only be raised by raising the productivity of the existing workforce. The works council was to consist of three representatives from management and five from the shop floor, three men and two women. This arrangement, whereby men voted for men and women for women, was later reformed. Other committees with worker representatives were also in evidence around this time; rate fixing, sick club, absentee and lateness, and canteen. Kathleen was thrilled to be nominated for the works council and, after an exciting campaign was duly elected. Elsie was also voted onto the sick benefit club committee. The diary recorded their
obvious delight. 'We are both amazed, (& very proud) that we find ourselves representing the workers on their committees. We always thought that we cut absolutely no ice whatsoever ... We can only suppose that as we neither swank nor grumble & always work hard we have earned respect.'

Kathleen and her fellow woman representative, Mrs Dobson, were keen to distance themselves from what they viewed as 'violent communist demands'. One of the other works council representatives, Jimmy Dale, was a communist, but there is little evidence of hard line militancy in the factory. There was, however, profound scepticism on the part of the workforce towards the intentions of the management regarding the new committee. The diary noted that Kathleen was 'prepared to think that the management means as well as they sound — whereas the other Worker's delegates are deeply suspicious'. These suspicions were well founded as it soon became apparent that the management were more interested in "Telling the workers what" & not really seeming to want to know the workers' ideas and suggestions. Although management appear to have viewed the works council as more gesture than substance, the worker representatives clearly had other ideas and insisted that their demands and suggestions for improving productivity were taken seriously.

There seems little doubt that by mid 1943 industrial relations inside the factory had undergone significant changes. The works council had changed the factory culture to the extent that, although management still managed, they had to justify their actions to their worker representatives. Croucher has noted that women's most important impact on workplace committees was on issues of health, safety and welfare and this certainly seems to have been the case at Morrison's with Kathleen as the prime instigator of reforms. When she started at Morrison's Kathleen was appalled at conditions inside the works, particularly for the women workers; no seating, totally inadequate washrooms, filthy and overheated workshops and poor ventilation. She started pushing for reforms at an early stage. Her election to the works council greatly increased her authority and was an ideal vehicle for her to press forward her demands. Important changes did come about. Kathleen's most notorious campaign was for seating for the women in the machine shop. At first Mr Rapley, foreman, refused outright to consider the idea. Kathleen persisted and eventually management caved in and a stool was supplied for every woman in the machine shop.

The works council and its related sub-committees, although officially almost certainly purely advisory, in practice were increasingly involved in executive decisions. One indication of this was the charge hands' complaints that their authority was being undermined because workers channelled grievances through the works council rather than through them. The rate revision sub-committee of the works council challenged the timing of jobs, which it regarded as unjust, and succeeded in gaining improved times on several occasions. Kathleen, who was on this committee, felt particularly strongly about 'dirty jobs' where women on the capstan lathes were covered in oil. She managed to win a time allowance — 'washing time' — for these women. Worker representatives on the absentee and late committee also appear to have wielded considerable influence. In one particular case an unsupported mother, who was persistently late because she had to get her child to school, was given permission to make an official late start. Mr Hurst, works manager, began to rely on discussions with Kathleen about shop floor problems, causing Kathleen to complain that he was 'incapable' of making any decisions without her help.
Although management came to rely on Kathleen’s advice they still liked to reassert her inferior status whenever possible. Mr Hurst let her stand in his office whilst he sat at his desk during their discussions, which ‘incensed’ Kathleen. Although Kathleen was far removed from the left wing elements inside the factory, it does appear that war time circumstances fostered in her the hope that hierarchical divisions could be reduced and that the works council could create a genuine workplace democracy and raise productivity for the war effort. By May 1943 Kathleen had lost faith entirely in the management and confessed in the diary that she had ‘come round to the view of the majority that management do not really wish to co-operate with the workers at all’.

Welfare became a major issue in wartime with pressure being applied from above as well as below on the management to improve conditions. Morrison’s, with its hugely increased labour force and large number of women workers, was no exception. Government recognized that as the right to strike had been declared unlawful it had a moral obligation to oversee the welfare of industrial workers, many of whom were conscripted labour. One of the most pressing issues was the uneven and often poor quality of factory canteens. Consequently the Ministry of Labour took measures to ensure that all factories of any size had adequate factory canteens. The canteen at Morrison’s was an urgent problem, as it was not built for so large a workforce. Kathleen and Elsie complained in the diary of the long queues for meals and overcrowding in the seating areas. The management’s response was to bring in an ‘Efficiency Expert’ to reorganize the canteen.

Within a few months a brand new canteen, with seating for 450, was built with funding from the Ministry of Aircraft Production. The opening of the new canteen was accompanied by the introduction of the ‘Morrison’s Aircraft Symphonic Orchestra’, which was to play during all breaks. In keeping with the rest of the factory, attempts were made to bring the canteen under democratic control. Elsie was one of the few workers prepared to serve on the canteen committee, taking the view that it was her ‘reluctant duty’.

Elsie also took her role on the sick benefit committee seriously. Everyone contributed 6d. a week into a sick benefit fund after it was formed in February 1943. From this workers off sick would receive £1 a week for three weeks and 10s. for a further three weeks. The fund seems to have aggravated gender divisions within the factory as some of the men resigned after a few weeks, complaining about the amount of money being paid out to women workers. This view received no sympathy from the committee. The fund did have difficulty remaining solvent and it appears that benefits had to be reduced. The problem of sick pay came to a head when a worker with a very young family was off sick for ten weeks with a serious illness and known to be in dire straits. Kathleen pursued the matter and, to her surprise, management issued a notice announcing that employees of over four years service would be entitled to basic pay for six weeks and half basic pay for an additional six weeks. This news was greeted with excitement and jubilation in the factory. This ready concession to Kathleen’s pressure indicates that almost certainly management were disposed to make this kind of change, which fits in with the general trend of improving welfare benefits at this time.

The factory was the focus of many lively social and sports activities. The firm held occasional dinner dances which were very popular. Kathleen and Elsie took little part in
official Morrison’s social events. They saw work mates outside the factory from time to time, but did not seem to have developed any really close friendships. They usually tried to get away after finishing on Saturday, often accepting hospitality from friends or family or meeting friends at the Café Royal or the Savoy Court Hotel.\(^8\) Inside the factory, however, they made huge efforts to get on with fellow workers. They were very friendly with workers in their section and always ready to engage in shop floor gossip and to offer help or advice.\(^9\) There are plenty of indications though of the enormous gulf between the two women and the other workers at Morrison's. No one knew Kathleen as 'Kattes' yet this is the name she was universally known as by close friends and family.\(^10\) Culturally they were on different wavelengths. The English Folk Dance and Song Society remained the centre of their social network (along with their respective families), yet they made almost no mention of this interest in the factory.

The last phase

During 1942 Kathleen and Elsie wrote enthusiastically about their new life in Croydon. In November they were convinced that they were much happier than if they had stayed in Benacre worrying all the time about the war. Both felt they had ‘very much enjoyed, both at the Training Centre and Morrison’s, the opportunity we had of mixing with working-class people on absolutely equal terms’.\(^11\) But from as early as the spring of 1943 the diary begins to show signs that the adventure was beginning to wear thin. On 5 April they confessed to being ‘homesick and depressed’ about leaving Benacre after a trip home. They longed to get away from the long exhausting shifts and the noise and grime of the factory. Both began to experience health problems. This culminated in severe ‘flu in Elsie and pneumonia in Kathleen at the end of the year, necessitating an extended period of sick leave for both of them. Upon their return from convalescence in February they confessed to being ‘bored to tears’ and unable to settle back into factory routine.\(^12\) Life in Croydon took a considerable turn for the worse at the end of June 1944 when the ‘flying bombs’ plagued the area and continued for a prolonged period. In addition to the discomforts of the Duppas Hill shelter they had to take turns at fire watching. On 6 September they recorded that they had spent the first night in their own beds for more than eleven weeks. During the middle of this they made a request for an official release from their posts, but this was refused as the factory still had work for them.\(^13\) By this time they had become, in Summerfield’s terms, reluctant conscripts. After the success of the Allies on the continent in the summer of 1944, the end of the war was at last in sight. Aircraft production was no longer the first priority and it seems that Kathleen and Elsie felt that their personal contribution to the war effort was no longer necessary.

By November 1944 they had both become very demoralized and exhausted. The idea of pouring out their thoughts into the diary had lost its appeal. In almost the last entry they wrote that there was little point in keeping the diary as ‘one day seems so much like another’.\(^14\) Two days later, on 30 November 1944 the diary ends abruptly. Kathleen and Elsie continued at Morrison’s until April 1945, but made no further attempt to record their experiences.

Morrison’s began to run down before the end of the war and this is undoubtedly the reason that Elsie and Kathleen were permitted to leave shortly before the end of the war.
Women who wished to stay would not have been able to do so as dilution arrangements meant they were the first to go when the firm began to decline. In fact, within a short period of time, male workers were also laid off as the factory closed down due to government contracts for aeroplanes not being renewed.

Little is known about Elsie and Kathleen in the immediate period after their release other than that they returned to their Surrey home. There is correspondence which indicates that Kathleen was laid up for several months with a serious injury to her back. We also know that Elsie was in a poor state of health at the end of the war. These health problems and the need for an extended period of recuperation from war work appear to have kept them from paid employment until 1947. They then took up the post of joint regional organizers for the English Folk Dance and Song Society and worked a territory which stretched from south London to the south coast.

In 1960 Kathleen, at the age of sixty, married an old friend Tommy Adkins who had recently been widowed. Elsie, who had been living with Kathleen since 1935, left Benacre and moved to a cottage in Suffolk near to a sister and close friends, later moving to a nursing home. Tommy died in 1976. Elsie and Kathleen continued their friendship until the end. Elsie was staying with Kathleen in 1980 when she became ill and died in Guildford Hospital. During the 1980s Kathleen made some attempts to find a publisher for the diary but these efforts came to nothing. After her death in 1991 the diary was donated to the Imperial War Museum by her stepdaughter, Alison Speirs.

Conclusion

The Church-Bliss diary reveals how dilution arrangements in Britain during the Second World War ensured that women working in previously male preserves were prevented from achieving any sort of equality with male workers in the same part of the production process. The diary also provides a detailed and intimate account of the way in which the war affected relations inside one particular factory. The workforce, seizing opportunities provided by the conditions of full employment and the demands of wartime production, consciously used their newfound strength to bring about change. Church-Bliss and Whiteman played a significant part in this process, defending the interests of their fellow workers and promoting improvements for the benefit of the workforce, particularly the women. These victories have to be seen in the overall context of rising welfare standards in wartime. Nevertheless, victories they were, requiring human agency to establish the pressure which led management to introduce new welfare initiatives.

Relating the diary to recent historiography it seems clear that Summerfield’s categories of ‘heroine volunteers’ and ‘stoic conscripts’ have considerable resonance. As we have seen, as the war progressed the two women moved from something approaching a ‘heroic’ identity to a stance much closer to the ‘stoic’ identity. Kathleen’s attempts in later life to publish the diary perhaps indicate a return to a more heroic outlook and a desire for public recognition of her (and Elsie’s) contribution to the war effort. In any case these categories were intended to apply to younger women. We still know very little about older women’s perception of their wartime roles, either during the war or after. As Dorothy Sheridan’s portrayal of the munition worker (the young, muscular and sexy ‘Rosy the Riveter’) shows, our overwhelming image of women in industry in the Second World War is a
youthful one.\textsuperscript{91} Reconstructing Women’s Wartime Lives, with its exclusive focus on young women, may have inadvertently added to the strength of this image.

The diary, with its insights into the thoughts of two women in middle age, may do something to highlight the position of older women whose contribution to the war effort appears to have been largely forgotten. Overturning the romantic, happy-go-lucky ‘Rosie’ image reveals a bleaker side to women’s war work. As single women they did not enjoy the privileges of a week’s holiday for a husband on leave and, unlike their male colleagues, they had no one to cook and care for them when they went home. Their constant presence at work, and consent to overtime for ‘rush jobs’, was taken for granted by the management. Consequently the two women were pushed to breaking point by their efforts to keep working during the weeks when prolonged bombing raids deprived them of much needed sleep (of course, women workers with dependent children were in an even worse position). The diary also highlights the impact of wartime state interventions into personal life. During the summer of 1944 Elsie and Kathleen felt trapped and demoralized, but were refused release so they just had to carry on. Joyful victory celebrations and happy marital reunions in 1945 are amongst our most dominant images of the war, often obscuring the grimmer aspects of the conflict. The diary, with its long descriptions of extended bombing and shelter life, brings to the fore the more desolate times, particularly those of great discomfort, fear and exhaustion. It also acts as a reminder that not all women war workers were heterosexual. Although we cannot say anything decisive about the precise relationship between Kathleen and Elsie, we can say that it was extremely close and that neither actively pursued heterosexual relationships during this time.

As single older women Whiteman and Church-Bliss do not fit into either of the dominant perceptions of femininity in the post war years; the ‘new woman’ transformed by the war or the ‘traditional woman’ happily devoted to husband and family.\textsuperscript{92} The diary, and what we know of the women’s lives after the war, does not indicate that their factory experience profoundly changed either woman. Neither can their story be used to support any notions of ‘social levelling’, although they did keep in touch (remotely) with a few friends from the factory and they became more sympathetic to the concerns of working-class people as a result of their experience.

This does not detract, however, from the overall significance of the diary. The daily account of factory life and labour in wartime, so carefully and meticulously compiled by Kathleen Church-Bliss and Elsie Whiteman, constitutes an important new source for students of the home front in Britain during the Second World War and adds greatly to our understanding of the role of older women in the war effort.

References


I wish to express my thanks to the anonymous reader of this article for Labour History Review, whose detailed and constructive criticism was a great help in producing the final draft.

3 Many of these were published by Virago Press, e.g. M. Pember Reeves, Round About a Pound a Week, London, 1979, from the original 1913 edition, published by G. Bell.


5 She cites specifically Graham Dawson and Alistair Thomson. The only publication of the Popular Memory Group is R. Johnson et al., Making Histories, Studies in History-Writing and Politics, London, Hutchinson/Birmingham, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1982. The empirical practice of these ideas is most usually associated with A. Thomson, Anzac Memories, Living with the Legend, Australia, Oxford University Press, 1994.


8 Summerfield, Reconstructing Women’s, p. 26, and see Appendix 2.

9 Smith, War and Social Change, p. 211.

10 Summerfield, Women Workers, reproduces the figures in the table on p. 16. It is also mentioned in S. Boston, Women Workers and the Trade Union Movement, London, Davis-Poynter, 1980, p. 205.


13 The Church-Bliss/Whiteman Diaries are available at the Imperial War Museum, Department of Documents. An edited version has recently been published: S. Bruley (ed.), Working for Victory, A Diary of Life in a Second World War Factory, Stroud, Sutton in association with the Imperial War Museum, 2000.


15 Details of Kathleen’s family history are available in a memoir she wrote in the 1960s which is in the hands of Alison Speirs. I am grateful to Mrs Speirs for the help she has given me on this project.

16 Handwritten memoir written for Roger Marratt, held at Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS), n.d., appears to be 1980s.

17 Interview with June Salusbury, 27 September 1999, London, niece of Elsie Whitehead. I am grateful to Mrs Salusbury for biographical information relating to her aunt.

18 J. Matthews, ‘Elsie Whitehead’, short obituary held at EFDSS.


20 In 1932 the English Folk Dance Society merged with the Folk Song Society to create the English Folk Dance and Song Society, see endnote 16 above.

21 Church-Bliss/Whiteman Diary, Imperial War Museum, 26 February 1942.


23 We know little of the motivation behind the decision to write the diary. It is known, however, that Kathleen was an established diary writer, diaries relating to her school days are held at the EFDSS.

24 Jane Salusbury, Interview, 27 September 1999.
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It must, of course, be acknowledged that the concept of ‘skill’ is as much bound up with ideology as practical expertise, see A. Phillips and B. Taylor, ‘Sex and skill’, Feminist Review (ed.), *Waged Work, A Reader*, London, Virago, 1986.


Church-Bliss/Whiteman Diary, Imperial War Museum, 18 February 1942.

Ibid., 16 February 1942.

Ibid., 4 March 1942.

Ibid., 16 March 1942.

Ibid., 20 February 1942.

Ibid., 1 May 1942.

Ibid., 21 February 1942.

Ibid., 7 March, 17 April, 4 May 1942.

Ibid., 27 May 1942.

Ibid., 30 May 1942.

Ibid., 13 June 1942.


Mass Observation, *People*, p. 124, is very sceptical about the concept of skill, noting how elastic this concept was.

The diary draws attention to the poor washing and toilet facilities for women and mentions a figure of ‘300 girls’. Church-Bliss/Whiteman Diary, Imperial War Museum, 1 November 1942.

Morrison’s did acquire one woman inspector, Ivy Barney. It is likely that she was tolerated as she was known to be a single parent (deserted wife). Even so it was regarded as embarrassing when she rejected flawed work submitted by skilled men.

Church-Bliss/Whiteman Diary, Imperial War Museum, 13 February 1943. The women were told that the firm found it uneconomic to operate night shifts for women.

Ibid., 19 March 1943, 12 June 1942 and elsewhere.

According to Croucher, *Engineers*, p. 179, average earnings for aircraft workers were £7 8s. 7d. a week in January 1943. Women in the industry were earning considerably less than this, whilst many men earned more. Wartime inflation raised this figure by about a £1 by 1944. Mass Observation, *People*, quotes Ministry of Labour Statistics for July 1941 for industrial workers as a whole as £2.45, for adult women and £2.19, for adult men.

Church-Bliss/Whiteman Diary, Imperial War Museum, 7 October 1942.

Ibid., 25 July 1942.

Ibid., 18 December 1942.

Ibid., comes up several times, e.g. 12 and 30 September 1942.

Ibid., an example of this is given on 29 July 1942.


Church-Bliss/Whiteman Diary, Imperial War Museum, 14 and 28 August 1942, 24 July 1944.

Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women’s*, pp. 121–32. She makes a distinction between ‘heroines’ and ‘stories’ on this question. There is insufficient space to develop this here.

I am grateful to a conversation with my colleague Brad Beaven on this question.

Church-Bliss/Whiteman Diary, Imperial War Museum, 1 November 1942.

Ibid., 3 July 1942.

Ibid., 7 November 1942.
138,717 women joined the AEU in 1943. J. Jeffreys, *The Story*, pp. 214 and 260. By the end of 1944 women members represented fifteen per cent of the total membership. According to Wightman, *More Than*, p. 143, despite the apparent radicalism of the AEU towards women workers, the general unions were in fact better advocates of improved women’s pay as the AEU remained primarily committed to protecting wage rates for its skilled men. There is no sign that Kathleen and Elsie were aware of this.

For details of the national picture see Inman, *Labour*, pp. 376–92. This is also covered in Croucher, *Engineers*, pp. 151–63.

Ibid., 22 March 1943.

Ibid., 24 March 1943.

Ibid., 1 April 1943.

Croucher, *Engineers*, p. 262.

Ibid., 11 July 1942 and 27 May 1943.

Ibid., 27 May 1943 and subsequent comments, e.g. 11 October 1943.

Ibid., 27 September 1943. This is confirmed in the interview with Ken Peters.

Ibid., 12 and 30 November 1943; 15 December 1943.


Ibid., 8 January 1943.

Ibid., 14 February 1943.

Ibid., 29 April 1943.

Ibid., 8 May 1944.

Ibid., 4 August 1944.

Ibid., 18 July and 17 April 1943. The Savoy Court is regarded as a luxury hotel.

Ibid., 3 May 1943.

According to Alison Speirs, this name was given to her by her father as a nickname and stuck. It was used in correspondence, as seen by letters kept in the library of the EFDSS.

Ibid., 1 November 1942.

Ibid., 1 and 8 March 1944.

Ibid., 29 August 1944.

Ibid., 28 November 1944.


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