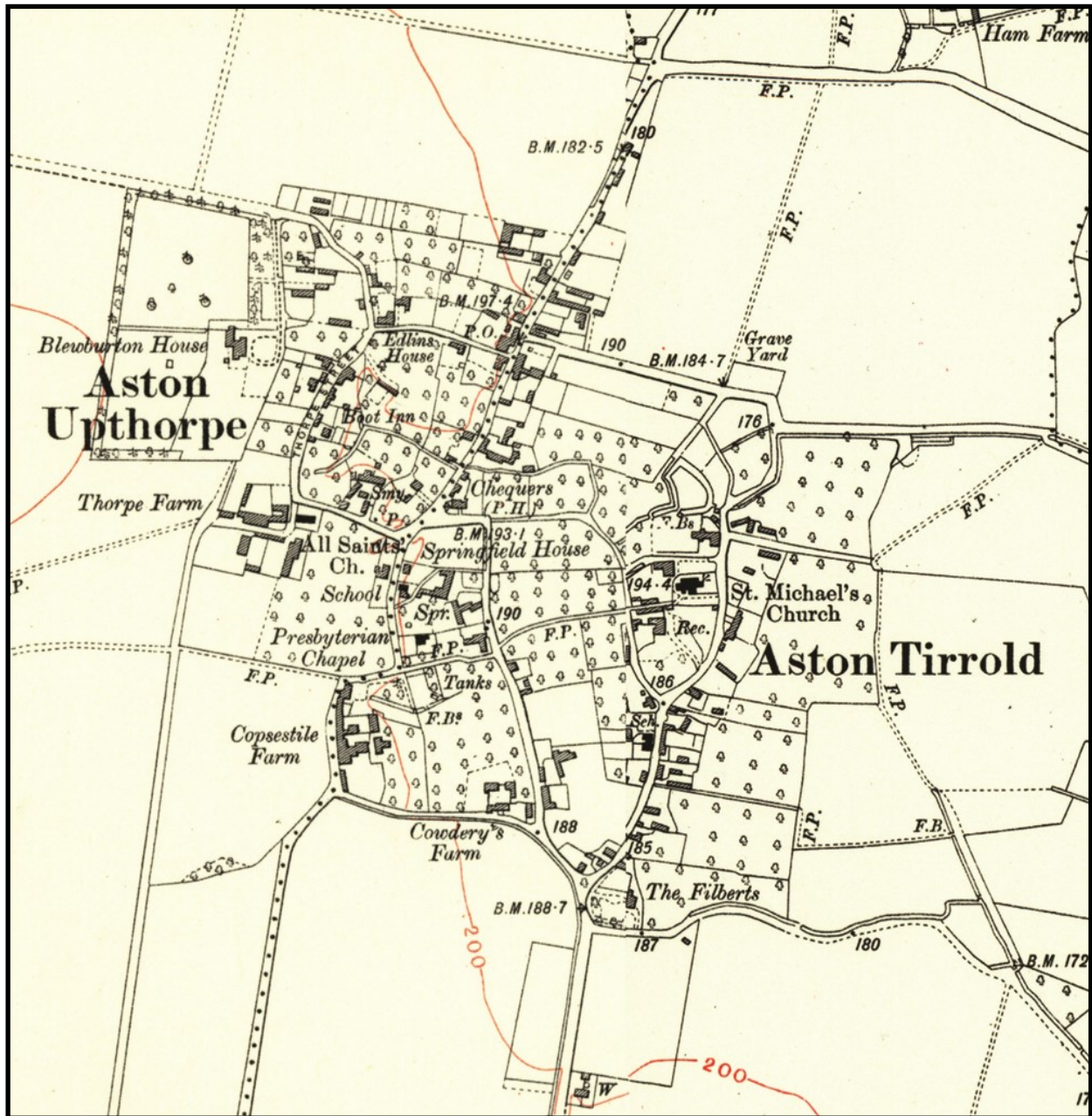


**The Astons Home Front:  
The Role of Women during WW1.**



**Astons History Group  
2018**

An OS map from 1914 showing the Astons as they were at the time of the First World War.



Note the open spaces reflecting the agricultural use of many paddocks and fields within the village, which at that time consisted of farm houses, barns, occupational houses such as smithy, bake-house, shop etc, and tithe cottages owned by village landowners.

Front Cover:

Fields on Thorpe Street (top: AHG Curry slide). Land girls bringing in the harvest (bottom: IWM image).

Aston Tirrold and Aston Upthorpe are spring line villages on the northern edge of the Berkshire Downs (now part of the North Wessex Downs) – five miles to the south-west of Wallingford and five miles to the south-east of Didcot. In 1914 they were in the county of Berkshire but now lie within Oxfordshire.

In 2014 the Astons became part of the English National Heritage nationwide project to commemorate the centenary of the beginning of the First World War: “We will remember them”.

With an ambitious programme of research and with the involvement of many current and past residents of the villages, the project culminated in a fascinating weekend long exhibition.

In 2018 a second exhibition was held to commemorate the ending of the war bringing together the initial research and much new information that had emerged since the first exhibition.

This booklet is one of a series of publications resulting from the Astons’ *We Will Remember Them* project:

It reproduces the text from subject boards produced for the exhibition by the Astons Womens’ Institute.

- Wee Joe: From Galloway to Flanders Fields
- Astons fallen soldiers
- “We will remember them” : extracts from the exhibition . (Jan.2019)
- The Astons Home Front: the role of women during WW1.

See also: <https://www.theastons.net/history/the-astons-at-war>

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## Women in War time: the role of women in the First World War

Life for most women at the beginning of the twentieth century was not easy - rural women in particular had hard lives, but always within traditional female areas. But all that changed in August 1914.

With 3 million men away to fight Britain was struggling to find sufficient labour for both industry and food production, and the government was keen to encourage women to get involved, in particular in growing and preserving food to increase the supply of food to the war-torn nation.

Three key organisations were set up in 1915, The Women's Land Army, the Women's Forage Corps (the army still largely un-mechanised and using vast numbers of horses, as hauntingly portrayed in Michael Morpurgo's novel "War Horse") and the Women's Forestry Corps - again trench building, ammunition cases and a host of other military needs required hugely increased timber production.

Food was definitely a first priority - Britain's food imports made up around 50% of the country's requirements, so Germany's successful naval blockades created major problems.

Volunteers flocked to help - by the end of 1917 there were over 250,000 women working as farm labourers, with an additional 20,000 in the Land Army.

Although their new roles were vital, women were often met with suspicion and hostility locally, and even at a national level offers of help from women's organisations were rejected initially by government. Many farmers were against employing female workers, and the Board of Trade had to send representatives out to encourage the acceptance of women onto farms.

"The reaction from farmers was not encouraging, mainly because the spectacle of a government-backed "Army" meant they were going to have to pay 18

shillings a week minimum to these women. Not a fortune and nowhere near men's pay, but painfully more than many farmers were parting with to schoolchildren and pensioners, whom they were using in considerable numbers".

Kate Adie's "Fighting on the home front : the legacy of women in World War One". 2013. p264.

### New Roles – New Freedoms

In 1994 the BBC interviewed an ex Land Army girl, Agnes Greatorex, as part of their *All Our Lives* series :

*"When I became a Land Girl I thought that's it, I'm independent," she said. I had a pound a week, not as much as the men but a lot still - there was no-one to boss me, no more running around at the beck and call of the cook.*

*I think the First World War did change women because once they'd had a taste of freedom they wouldn't go back to service, they were free. We had to get up at five in the morning for milking, and then we'd have to take the milk up to Glan Ely hospital. After that - especially during the winter - we'd have to muck-out the cow sheds.*

*Then we might get half an hour for breakfast. I'd be out there picking up stones from the field or cutting hay, but I'd be as happy as a lark."*



However such independence was disapproved of by some, and the response to one Land Army volunteer approaching the wife of her vicar for a reference was: *“Do you know what it involves? You’ll be dressed as a man, and I object to that – it’s a disgrace to show your ankles.”*

## Astons’ memories

*“Most of the time (Mum) worked on the land working with a horse and cart gathering the hay and the harvest in. She loved her horses, birds and all animals and if she ever saw anyone mistreating them she created merry hell”.*

Mike Wheeler remembering his mother Gladys Wheeler (nee Dix) in his memoir *“The Wheelers of Aston.”* 2010.



## War’s End

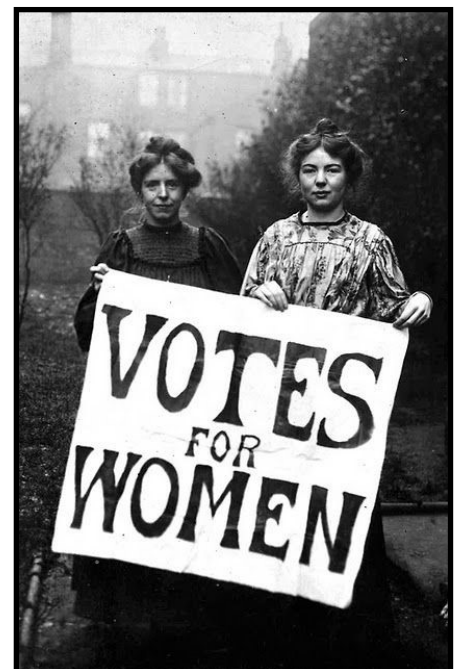
When the war ended in 1918 employment soon returned to its pre-war patterns as returning menfolk took back their jobs. But all was not forgotten, women had not only helped to feed the nation, they had plugged the gaping hole in labour left by the millions of men off fighting, and a door had been opened on previously male-only professions such as the railways, engineering, police and fire brigade, and perhaps crucially in the professions as well – in particular the medical professions..

There was little point in pretending anymore - women had proved they could take on any role a man had done, and they'd played an enormous part in winning the war. And as much as women helped shape the outcome of the war, the war also helped shape the outcome for women.

## The Legacy

In February 1918 The Representation of the People Act enfranchised 8.5 million women over the age of 30.

- The Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act (1918) allowed women to be elected into Parliament.
- In 1919 Mary Astor became the first female to sit in the House of Commons as an MP.
- The Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act (1919) made it illegal to exclude women from jobs because of their gender.
- In 1928 The Representation of the People Act extended the voting franchise to all women over the age of 21.



## Women's movements at the start of the First World War

In the nineteenth century women had no place in national politics. They could not stand as candidates for Parliament, they were not even allowed to vote. It was assumed that women did not need the vote because their husbands or fathers would take responsibility in political matters. A woman's role was seen to be child-rearing and taking care of the home.

But the industrial revolution had meant that increasing numbers of women were in full-time employment, with opportunities to meet and discuss political and social issues. An organised campaign for women's suffrage began.

"The Cause," as it was known, was a movement for women's rights generally, initially with no particular political focus, but by the close of the century the issue of the vote had become the focus of women's struggle for equality.

By 1914 the issue of the franchise had drawn women of all sections of society together and was giving them an identity which they had previously lacked.

We tend to lump them all together with the well-known name of Suffragettes, but in fact there were a number of organisations working for improved women's rights, some being formed as break away groups as disagreement grew on tactics.

- The **National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS)**
- The **Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU)**.
- The **Women's Freedom League (WFL)**.



When war broke out, however, the whole suffrage movement immediately scaled down, and even suspended some of their activities in the face of a greater threat to the nation.

**This was not just a negative response however!** It enabled the leaders of women's organisations, many of which it is important to remember were founded for social or educational causes, not just political, to prove that they could provide vital administrative and organisational back up to the government's war effort. Government soon realised that women's groups were a vital part of the nation's response to wartime challenges.

By 1918 Parliament was very conscious that they could not just return to pre-1914 attitudes to women when the war had ended. What would the public reaction be to the arrest of women who had done important work for the nation during the war, simply for wanting political rights after it?

It might take a few more years, but the work done by women during the war had paved the way for the progress of the post war years.

### "The Astons Connection".

You might think that the Astons were a sleepy village, cut off from the such national movements, but in fact we have we have a range of evidence showing the involvement of key members of our community in "The Cause" at this time.

Mrs. JF Cross who lived at the Manor was the president of the Oxon, Bucks and Beds Federation of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Society between 1912-14.



## The Women's Institute: The War Years

By 1914 the women's suffrage movement had been active in Britain for several years and was making everyone evaluate the role of women and their position in society.

The Women's Institute was very much a part of that movement, and many of the early protagonists played a part in both movements.

The first Women's Institutes had been established in British Columbia, Canada in 1897, but by 1914 there was a growing awareness in Britain of the role they could play in enhancing women's status and role in society.

In February 1915 Madge Watt, a founder member of the British Columbia Institute, addressed a conference in London on the important role country women could play in growing more food to support the war effort, and in September of that year the first British Women's Institute opened in the Anglesey village of Llanfairpwll. By 1918 700 institutes had been formed; by the end of 1919 there were 1,405. (By 2014 we had 212,000 members and around 6,600 individual Institutes).



*Llanfairpwll Institute's inaugural meeting, 1915.*

During those turbulent war years women had demonstrated their ability to cope, and belonging to their new nationwide organisation had given them increased freedom and the chance to meet others socially and across class boundaries. They did not look back.

### Government Support for the Women's Institute movement

The government rapidly recognised the value of an organisation that would harness the energies of women around the country to help to feed the nation, and the challenge to help with the war effort was an ideal way of getting women involved.

Because of the importance the government attached to the Women's Institutes' role in improving food efficiency, they initially determined that the new Women's Branch of the Board of Agriculture's Food Department would assume responsibility for setting up local institutes.

But Lady Denman, newly elected first President of the National Federation of Women's Institutes, was determined to establish their independence as soon as possible, and negotiated an arrangement in 1916 whereby the formation of WIs would thereafter become the responsibility of their National Federation.

She believed: *"that women would get nowhere if government officials were in charge, she brought the Institutes together into an independent federation... This was the chance to bring women together, to learn, to gain new skills, to market their goods... the principles were being laid down of national cooperation and for women to be involved in effective food production rather than merely subsisting on the land...it was accepted that the WIs should use their experience to bring produce to market...a quiet revolution was starting to take place in the lives of countrywomen."*

Kate Adie's "Fighting on the home front: the legacy of women in World War One". 2013. p.262.

## The Astons' Women's Institute

A later Astons WI was formed in March 1939 just before the start of the Second World War, however we have firm evidence of the existence of an earlier institute in a published talk given by Lucy Fuller to the Astons Women's Institute in 1921.

The talk was on the history of the villages of Aston Tirrold and Upthorpe and was given in "the Play Barn" (now The Manor Barn in Aston Street) showing an early connection between the WI and historic enterprise!

The role of women during the war years was clearly still very much in people's minds, as she closed her talk with the words:

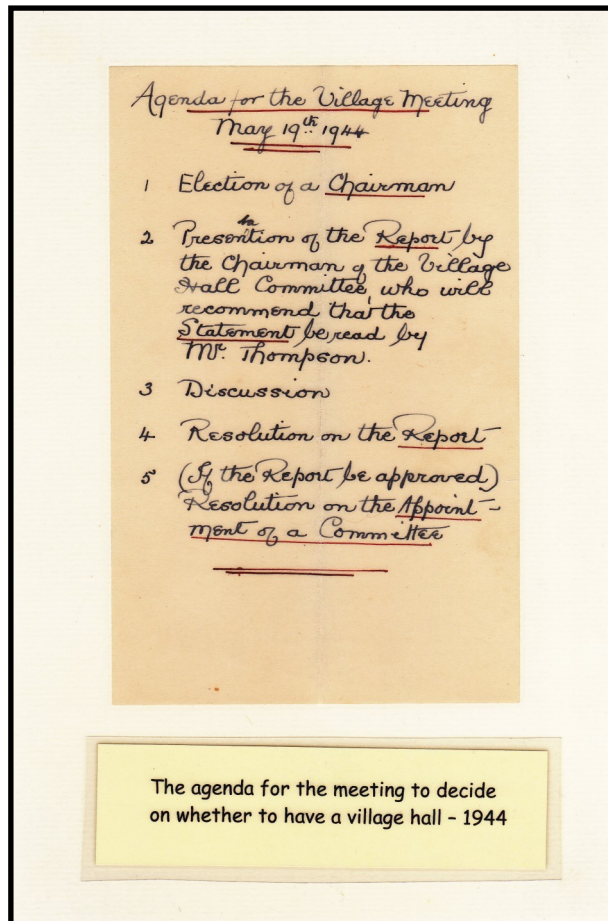
*"Let us remember that it is the lives of the people of Aston that make Aston, and we women must each do our bit to bring to pass a future that shall be worthy of the past".*

Certainly we know that the Astons WI played an extremely active part in the villages' war effort in the Second World War, and given how few years sadly elapsed between the two hostilities it would have been not only well remembered, but many of the women involved were once again reliving the fears and troubles of that first conflict.

- In 1942 they passed a resolution urging the establishment of a village hall "after the war," and in 1944 a public meeting was held that voted to confirm that resolution.
- In 1945 an orchard site in Thorpe Street was bought by public subscription.
- In 1949 the villages' first hall, a rented Nissen hut, was open for business.
- The current hall sits on that hall's foundations.



An Astons WI Christmas party in the Nissen hut  
village hall: 1950s.



## Food and Rationing

At the start of the war there were no significant food shortages, but the government was aware this might soon change and included food controls in its Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) regulations introduced in August 1914.

Initially people began panic buying food and hoarding it at home, and some shops sold out of food in days after the outbreak of war. However after the initial panic people settled down into a routine and food was not a problem until later on in the war

Britain continued to import food during the war (we only produced 33% of our food needs in 1914) but the Germans introduced unrestricted submarine warfare and merchant ships were sunk with great frequency, which had a drastic impact on Britain's food supplies.

In April 1916 Britain only had six weeks of wheat left - and of course bread was at that time a staple part of most people's diets.

Suddenly the war was brought home to families. Food shortages were becoming a serious problem, particularly in urban areas, and malnutrition was seen in poor communities. In February 1918 the government introduced rationing, ration cards were issued and everyone had to register with a butcher and grocer.

The government had avoided introducing rationing by as long as possible, as it was considered a sign of defeatism (*also the reason that no evacuation plans were introduced in the First World War*) but once it was introduced it worked well, and the problems that had been identified in the poorer communities disappeared.

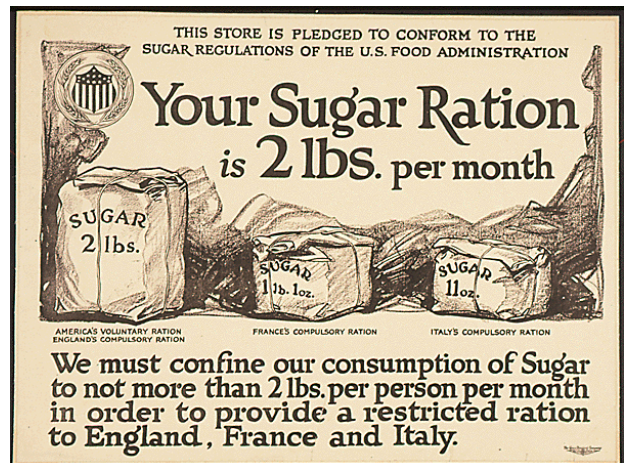
The lessons had been learnt, and in World War Two rationing and food production were notable successes on the Home Front.

## Food in the Villages.

Rural areas had wider options for self-sufficiency than towns - gardens could be turned into allotments, and poultry or small livestock could be kept in back gardens.

Parish councils had been given the right to set up allotments in the Smallholdings and Allotments Act in 1908, and the Astons' were established off Chalk Hill (in Spring Ditch field opposite where the pavilion stands today).

But that didn't mean the villages was exempt from the wide ranging regulations brought in at the start of the war, which were intended to enforce food economy and to increase production.





*Astons National School*

The National School's log book, written by the headmaster, Mr John Evans, refers to regular meetings of the village's Food Economy Campaign, lectures on food production, and for the distribution of supplementary rations to villagers.

*5 October 1917. Received a letter from the Education Secretary re picking blackberries for jam making for the sailors and soldiers. This is a poor place for blackberries and what few there were have been gathered already. The managers therefore advise me that the scheme is not workable here.*

*16 November 1917. Food Economy Campaign. A special meeting of the Parish Council will be held in the school room this evening.*

*23 November 1917. Food Economy Campaign. The committee will meet in the school this evening at 6.30pm.*

*1 March 1918. Food Production. A public meeting will be held in the school this evening at 6.30pm.*

## Village Records.

Parish records, both civil and church, make surprisingly few references to the impact of the war on village life, but where they do they often are food related:

### *Aston Tirrold Parish Register (St. Michael's Church):*

August 28 1914 "It took some time to rouse the village to the importance of the war, there was little sign of the conflict here at first except a rise in price, especially sugar." (*Berkshire and Oxonian Register cutting, stuck into the book*).

June 16 1915 "There were no shortages of food except sugar."

"It is hard for agricultural labourers to eat less bread, which is their staple food, but I regret to say that one could find no trace of any effort to eat substitutes such as porridge in Aston except among the better educated in the larger houses. Bread prices reached their highest in the spring of 17, (a) loaf in the village being 11d. (*equivalent to less than 5p today*) Government subsidies are now promised to reduce it to 9d."

### *Upthorpe Civil Parish Minutes book:*

Letter from the regional Food Control Committee to parish authorities:

"Registration of sugar consumers: it will frequently be necessary to obtain information that can only be supplied by someone having close knowledge of the circumstances of the inhabitants of the Parish."

*(I think we know what this means!)*

## The Astons Food Committee

*Record of the Annual Aston Upthorpe Parish Meeting.*

**23.11.17.** The women of Aston Upthorpe were invited to a Meeting at Orchard House on Friday Nov.23 1917 at 6.30 in obedience to the wishes of the Wallingford and Crowmarsh Rural Food Economy Committee.

Present: Mr. AH Morris (chairman), Major Morris, Mr H Burgess, Mrs Langmore, Mrs J Corderoy, Mrs F Jarvis, Miss Mead, Miss Edith Fuller, Mrs Horsman, Miss E Barnes, Miss W Jarvis, and Miss Stark.

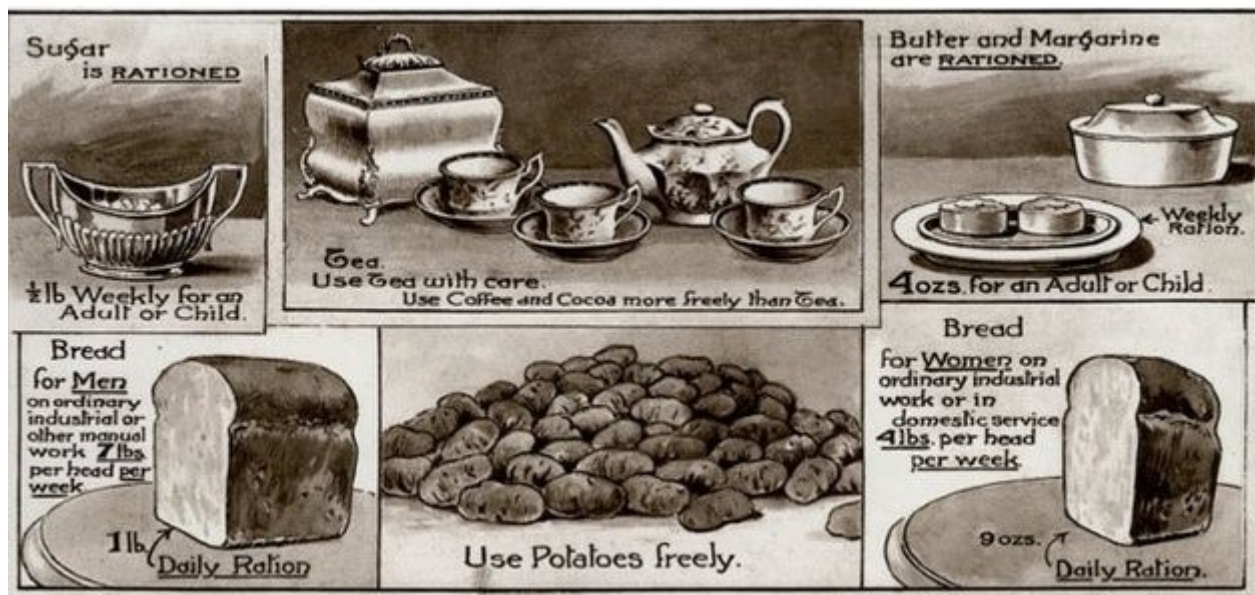
The Chairman and Clerk of the Aston Upthorpe Parish Meeting had attended a Meeting of the above named Committee on Nov.7<sup>th</sup> by invitation, Mr EJK Cross being in the chair. It was there stated that the Ministry of Food has urged upon the Local Food Control Committee the necessity of a Campaign in every Village to promote food economy and has requested the Food Control Committee to appoint a Food Economy Committee with Sub Committees for the purpose of bringing home to every householder the urgent need of strict economy. It was also proposed that Parish Councils or Parish Meetings shall form with the help of others, particularly women and labour representatives, the Economy Sub Committees for their respective parishes. The following resolution was passed:

“That this Meeting considers imperative the formation of a special and representative Committee of Food Economy in each parish whose duty it must be to consider promptly and adopt such measures as may be found by them to be most suitable for their circumstances.

“That the Chairman of each Parish Council and Parish Meeting be asked to acquaint the Local Food Control Committee with the results obtained.”

All this having been explained by the Chairman and the resolution read, a very interesting general discussion took place, and then the following Committee for Aston Upthorpe was formed:

Mr AH Morris (ex officio) , H Burgess (ex officio), Mrs Morris, Mrs Langmore, Miss Edith Fuller, Miss Stark, Mrs F Jervis, , Mrs J Corderoy, Mrs Clargo. (Signed) AH Morris. Chairman.



23. 11. 17.

The women of Aston Uphorpe were invited to a Meeting held at Orchard House on Friday Nov. 23. 1917 at 6.30 in obedience to the wishes of the Wallingford and Cromwell Rural Food Economy Committee.

Present: Mr A. H. Mottis (Chairman), Major Mottis, Mr H. Burgess, Mrs Langmore, Mrs J. Corderoy, Mrs J. Jarvis, Miss Mead, Miss Edith Fuller, Mrs Storsman, Miss E. Barnes, Miss W. Jarvis, & Miss Stark.

The Chairman & Clerk of the Aston Uphorpe Parish Meeting had attended a Meeting of the above-named Committee on Nov. 7th by invitation, Mr J. R. Cross being in the chair. It was there stated that the Ministry of Food has urged upon the Local Food Control Committee the necessity of a Campaign in every Village to promote food economy and has requested the Food Control Committee to appoint a Food Economy Committee with Sub-Committees for the purpose of bringing home to every household the urgent need of strict economy. It was also proposed that Parish Councils or Parish Meetings shall form with the help of others, particularly women and labour representatives, the Economy Sub-Committees for their respective parishes. The following resolution was passed:

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Mr A. H. Mottis } ex officio  
H. Burgess }

Mrs Mottis.

Mrs Langmore.

Miss Edith Fuller.

Miss Stark

Mrs J. Jarvis.

Mrs J. Corderoy.

Mrs Clargo.

A. H. Mottis

Chairman

## Organising the War Effort

County councils were responsible for enforcing a whole raft of government regulations designed to control food production in wartime Britain. Berkshire County Council's minute books give insight into the scale and detail involved, with regular agenda items on fruit bottling, cheese making, milk production, egg distribution, and bee culture.

They also organised a range of initiatives for food efficiency which included programmes for training the new female workforce.

### *Berkshire Agricultural Instruction Committee minutes. January 1916.*

"the members of the committee will be pleased to hear that an effort is being made by the University College to assist the farmer in the difficulty of the scarcity of labour by training women in milking and other light farm work, and drafting them out to different farms. This work was started from a purely experimental standpoint. So far the venture has been justified, and to such an extent that the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries are taking a lively interest in it. Should the demand for the services of women increase it might become necessary to extend the facilities for training them."

### *Berkshire CC Forage Committee. February 1916.*

"This Committee, having had it brought to their notice that no straw is to be bought or released, wishes to inform the Forage Committee that they are very strongly of opinion that it is extremely hard upon agriculturalists in general – and small holders in particular – involving great loss to them, as well as great loss to the produce. This Committee earnestly hopes that the Forage Committee will use every endeavour to at once take every step to ensure some better arrangement being made."



*Hay production on the Downs, viewed from Chalk Hill.*

## Village Life

Village life was affected both by the loss of menfolk to the forces and by the change in role of those left in the villages, who had not only to deal with taking over the departed men's roles, but also with the an increase in regulation and control.

On these boards we show a selection of quotes we have culled from the records we have researched.

### Parish register of St.Michael's Church Aston Tirrold.

June 1916 "officers from the Flying Corp flew from Birmingham to land in a barley field between Wallingford and Hagbourne roads and walked to the rectory, this was the first visit of an aeroplane to Aston"



September 6 1917 "this afternoon Lt Robert Slade RFC flew over the village for some time and performed many air manoeuvres and tricks, including "Looping the Loop" and flying upside down."

*Sadly inserted in a space after this entry:*

"On Tuesday July 23 1918 Robert Slade was accidentally killed while flying near Shrewsbury and his body was laid to rest in Thorpe churchyard on July 26; he had been seriously wounded while flying in France and had returned to home service."

Xmas 1916 "Two discharged soldiers, Bertram Smith and Westbury approached me with an idea of sending a parcel to each Aston man who is serving. They collected the money and with the help of a small committee we sent parcels for Xmas containing the following - tobacco, cig, peppermints, woollen mits, candles, ointments, cig papers"

January 1917 War Memorial chapel – work begun, to be ready by Easter

August 4 1917 Day of Permanent Intercession for the War

September 1917 "I found many changes. Nearly all the young men had now gone...I found that our postman Newman had gone and been replaced by a smart girl, his sister in law, previously a cook, who bicycled from Wallingford... The second post had been discontinued.

November 23-27 1917. National Mission of Hope and Repentance.

"to make people at home more fit to receive back men who had undergone sobering experiences at the front.... The poorer people of the village responded well to our efforts, and the afternoon and evening services were well attended, averaging 50 women in afternoon and 100 people in the evening - however there was disappointing non-attendance by those who should have been the first to give a lead in this national matter to the village."

### Aston Upton Parish Meeting : Minutes of Annual Meeting.

August 1917 – A letter from Wallingford Rural District Council asks parishes "to prepare a return with a view to ascertain if there is any want of new houses within their area so that a scheme may be prepared for providing necessary houses to prevent delay after the war."

Qu.1. "Has the war produced any marked increase or decrease in the Working Class population of your Parish – (Answer) No marked increase but 15 men have joined Army of whom 4 have been killed.

Additional need? (Answer) Only 2 for farm labourers."

## Rural education and social change in the twentieth century, by Patrick Dillon. 1974.

“The army drew heavily upon the young men of almost every village community throughout the land, particularly during the latter years of the war. The log book of the National School in the Astons shows frequent evening use of the schoolroom during the years 1917-19 by the Canvassing Committee for National Service. Thus, a succession of men were drawn first on a voluntary basis, but later by conscription to replace their brothers lost on the Western Front...”

“ the log book during the war years reveals that children were constantly kept at home to help on the land...The children picked blackberries to make jam for the soldiers and helped stage concerts to raise money for the Red Cross... By May 7<sup>th</sup> 1918 the National School’s War Savings totalled £69.8s.4d.”

Aston Tirrold and Upton: history tradition and neighbourhood. Lucy Fuller. 1921. (reprinted by the Astons History Group.2004)

“In the beautiful old farm-house at Lollingdon, John Masefield lived for several years; after he left the house was occupied by a party of German prisoners, who, in conspicuous garb of navy-blue and crimson, worked in the fields under military escort. They worked well, always firmly cherishing the belief that England was conquered, and what they sowed would be reaped by the Fatherland”.

“During the Great War there was a big sale in Wallingford in aid of the funds of the Red Cross. Farmers from all the neighbourhood contributed sheep, pigs, poultry, corn etc., and other people gave generously of their stores. Aston sent her old fire engine, which fetched the handsome sum of £12, and was bought by Mr H Snow, who preserved it as a relic of old times.”

## Fundraising for the War Effort

All communities played a huge role in supporting the war effort, whether through food economy, food production, savings schemes or, more directly, by supporting soldiers, both at the front or as prisoners of war.

Under the War Charities Act 1915 central government was keen to ensure only appropriate charities became engaged in fundraising, but obviously red tape on occasion became counterproductive, and they allowed ‘bulk’ registration by national groups rather than village by village.

Needless to say bureaucracy did get a bit over-enthusiastic on occasion.

See below the plaintive correspondence between an applicant and the county War Charities Committee representative:

*“In view of the attitude of your committee I am also desired to ask if in the event of it being necessary to make a monthly house to house collection to support a prisoner of war in Germany (proceeds to be sent to the Berks Regt Prisoners Fund Wallingford according to the new rules for the relief of prisoners) the collectors will in any way make themselves liable for not registering themselves as a War Charity.”*

*“I beg to acknowledge receipt of your letter of yesterday’s date.*

*I am exceedingly sorry you have had so much bother over this registration question; as a matter of fact it is very complicated and the Charities Commission has been considering the whole subject, with the result that it has now been decided that only the larger Branches which collect funds by public subscription need register with their local authorities...”*

Berkshire CC War Charities Committee. July 1917.

**Our next board “Our sources” gives more examples of village fundraising.**

## Our Sources : How do we know what we know?

On the previous board you will see a selection of quotes from village sources that we have used when researching this exhibition.

Our researches have of course been limited by what is available – what gets retained within the village, or what gets passed to archive bodies is very hit or miss unfortunately. Nevertheless enough has been found to give a good sense of village life during this period.

**Our village archives:** The History Group Archive has accumulated over the years a wide range of material - some of which was very useful for this project, for example Lucy Fuller's history of the village, written in 1921 when the effects of the war years were still very much part of daily life.

**Berkshire Record Office:** Many documents relating to the villages are held at the county archive in Reading - our villages passed from Berkshire to Oxfordshire in 1974. They include records of various Astons' organisations such as the parish council or church council, together with wartime records for various county council departments, which give much detail on how the war effort was regulated at a local level.

**Church records:** The Church of England vicar at the outbreak of war was the Reverend Green Wilkinson. Because of his experience as a chaplain in South Africa during the Boer Wars he volunteered as a forces chaplain in September 1914, and was therefore absent from the village from September 1914 to September 1915.

However for the period before his departure and again after his return his records in the St. Michael's parish register are a marvellous insight into village life at the time. (See his photo on the table below – kindly loaned by The Astons Parochial Church Council).

**The Astons Village News** archive also includes a Village Memories series - where older village residents gave fascinating insights into village life earlier in the century.

On the table below you will see Gilbert Corderoy's memoirs as recorded in the Village News in 1995, together with a record of a conversation with his wife some years earlier.

### **Extracts from the National School log book, written by the head teacher Mr John Evans.**

Mar 25 <sup>th</sup> 1916	Received from Education Officer Circular No.182: War Time Economy.
May 11 <sup>th</sup> 1916	To hand war labour exemption certificates for Winifred Joan BROWN and Ernest James CORBETT.
Oct 10 <sup>th</sup> 1916	A war savings association has been formed in the school. We are affiliated to the National War Savings Association.
March 9 <sup>th</sup> 1917	Total war coupons sold to date 780.
Oct 23 <sup>th</sup> 1912	A concert was given in the schoolroom this evening. £7-8-0 going to the Red Cross fund.
Nov 16 <sup>th</sup> 1917	Food Economy Campaign. A special meeting of the parish council will be held in the school room this evening.
July 12 <sup>th</sup> 1918	France's National Day. The last lesson this morning was devoted to the above. A short address was given by the Rector (Rev CB Longland).  On the noble part played by the French Nation in the great struggle for Freedom. The children sang appropriate songs and The Marseillaise.
Oct 25 <sup>th</sup> 1918	A lantern lecture entitled "Our Day" given in the schoolroom this evening by Dr Smith, the proceeds to the Red Cross.

## The War is Over

We are lucky to have two records of the end of war for our village, an entry in Dr Robert Moon's diary for November 11<sup>th</sup> when he was travelling to London by train, and entries in the National School's log book for both Victory Day and Armistice Day.

### *Robert Moon's diary entry for November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1918.*

"Left Copse Stile about 9:20 – Ethel walked a little way with me; it was quite fine and not too muddy. Train left Cholsey at 10:25, one change at Reading. While waiting there we suddenly heard the 'hooter' and then there was a general wailing and hooting from which it became clear that the Armistice had been signed! On the way up to Paddington one saw quite small houses adorned with flags.

On reaching London at 12 O'clock I found the Edgware Road and Praed Street quite gay with flags and in Oxford Street there was much excitement. Walked with Sir John Collie via Piccadilly Circus and Regent Street; there were great crowds singing up and down, much excitement, but nothing unseemly or unreasonable. Altogether it was a great event, one could hardly realise it".



*End of war celebrations at Piccadilly Circus. (Daily Express)*

### *Extracts from the log book of St. Michael's School Aston Tirrold.*

November 11      Victory Day

"Just before noon the Rector brought the news that the Armistice had been signed. Secular work was suspended and we humbly fell upon our knees and heartily thanked God for his Great Mercy vouchsafed unto us."

November 20      Armistice Day

"Mrs Moon gave the children afternoon tea, followed by conjuring entertainment. Needless to say it was a red letter day for the small village community. In the evening the locals got together for a lantern lecture by Dr Smith. The evening closed for the Christmas vacation".

Elsewhere in this exhibition you will see a series of photos that were made into postcards to commemorate the unveiling and dedication of the villages' war memorial.



*The Aston's war memorial unveiling ceremony in 1921.*

## Those left behind:

We have seen on earlier boards how village life changed and adapted in time of war, with women taking on their men folk's jobs and making do in reduced circumstances.

In 1914 Britain had only a small standing army, so the need to attract large numbers of volunteers was paramount. The Boer Wars had been the first major war after the emergence of a widely read press, and the almost complete disregard for families during that conflict had provoked outrage.

So it is significant that it was only 6 days after the declaration of war on August 4<sup>th</sup> that Prime Minister Asquith confirmed that allowances would be available for all wives and families, although they were not generous and a wife would often see their income halved during her man's absence.

Working class families were often just one illness or accident away from poverty, so this reduction was a real risk for families. Many women were entering the workforce for the first time to replace absent men, and children were also helping by taking on extra jobs or errands, but there were limited options for new work, particularly in small rural communities.

Financial assistance was available for families from the local poor relief system, and also from a network of national and local charities, but it was not a pleasant process for women who were only short of money because their menfolk were away serving their king and country.

In the countryside accommodation was nearly all linked to employment, so our Astons soldiers' families would have lived in tied cottages that in theory could have been withdrawn once the breadwinner was no longer available - however we would hope that a strong sense of responsibility by their employers would have prevailed in the close knit community of the Astons, or that extended families could if necessary take in daughter in laws and grandchildren.

A new set of difficulties arose however for families once the sad news arrived of their loved one's death.

The government emphasised the role of parents, and particularly mothers, so much of the publicity over soldiers' deaths was linked to their grievous loss and heroic sacrifices. There was no financial obligation towards bereaved parents, so this was a straightforward exercise for them. However the attitude towards widows was a more complex issue, and one with significant financial implications for the state.

At the start of the war when the government started thinking about the implications of widows' pensions their estimates were for only 50,000 widows, whereas the final figure was 235,233.

Only three of the Astons dead were married men (Frederick John Lay, James Henry Corbett, and Albert William Lewington) but it is important to understand how their widows might have been treated by national government, as were widows all around the country, in the fight for financial security following the loss of their husbands.

*(Unfortunately census information that could have provided specific Astons information is not available as yet under the 100 years' rule)*

## Reasons for non-receipt of pension:

- A widow had to be married to the soldier at the time of his enlistment - none who married later on in his service were eligible for a pension.
- If a soldier died from wounds received other than in the direct course of action again their widows were not eligible - for example if they were wounded by shellfire while off duty.
- If there was no proof of the death - and many bodies were either never found or were lost after subsequent bombardments – relief was often withheld.
- Pensions were a recognition for good service, so if a soldier had a record of misbehaviour they would not be deemed eligible.

- Similarly, if a widow was deemed to have brought their husband's memory into disrepute they would have their pension removed. To this end a network of regular checks were in place to ensure that widows were deserving of continued funding. Taking a lodger might bring income, but just as easily might lead to accusations of inappropriate behaviour and loss of pension.
- *(Ironically the gaining of suffrage emancipation in the 1920s led to electoral rolls being used to identify possible cohabitations and subsequent loss of benefit).*
- There were many cases of children being forcibly placed in orphanages so that the mother could go out to work and reduce her requirements for benefit.
- Using a different tactic, the government tempted widows to remarry with a one off payment of £39 - a payment that in some cases was followed by the departure, with cash, of the new husband. Not surprisingly there is also evidence that these marriages were often bigamous.

Basically anything that would reduce the government's long term financial commitment was considered.

In 1920 the newly set up National Council of Social Service carried out a nationwide survey which found that 35% of widows were in receipt of benefit and were therefore subject to a regular and humiliating regime of home visits and inspections which included:

- health visitors
- war pensions investigators
- church workers
- poor relief inspectors
- school attendance officers
- the Soldiers' and Sailors' Family Association (a key forces' charitable organisation)

## We shall remember them

The first national Peace Day was held in July 1919, followed by the dedication of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in 1920 – both part of a real determination to mark the sacrifices of the lost generation. Some communities marked this with a memorial hall - or as in the Astons with a permanent war memorial – where those men killed during the war were named.

Women who lost their lives during the war however - and there were many, whether by bombardment of medical positions near the front or by accidents in munitions factories - were *not* listed on war memorials around the country, and in spite of their grievous loss, soldiers' widows were excluded from full membership of veterans associations.



Widows' lives, grim enough as they were, were made more miserable than they need to have been by central government's continued intransigence towards them, even through the decades following the second world war - leading in 1971 to the founding of the War Widows Association of Great Britain with the aim of persuading the British government to make war widows' pension tax-free - a goal which it finally achieved in 1979.

*"they were excluded from ordinary social interaction at the risk of approbation, local gossip and the loss of a pension ... they were a perceived threat to the ex-servicemen in the jobs market, and a sexual threat to single women in the marriage market."* (British widows of the First World War: the Forgotten Legion, by Andrea Hetherington. 2018).

**We should remember them as well.**