

Veterans Voices – Background Notes to Mary Sims' interview

All of the interviews in the Poppy Scotland's VE Day Veterans Voices collection cover a wide range of interesting topics from what life was like between the wars to experiences in WWI through to VE Day and coming home. The following notes provide some additional background information about some of the topics raised in Mary Sim's interview <http://learning.poppyscotland.org.uk/veday75/vv-marysim/> as well as links to further information and related videos.

Early Years (41 secs)

In 'Early Years' Mary talks about her life before the war. Her father, a staunch Christian worked in a linoleum factory while Mary enjoyed going to school, apart from PE.

Every Day Life for a young person in Scotland

After World War I, Scotland was very poor. In the late 1920's the Great Depression took place when the economy of the world collapsed. In Scotland unemployment was very high and poverty was common. Families were quite large and children and young people were often expected to go to work at an early age and to give their earnings to help the family. They had to do the job or trade their parents chose for them. Holidays were unpaid so few people could afford to go away. Charities and church organisations would raise funds to take children from inner cities to the countryside or seaside for day trips or residential holidays.

Education was free and every child from 5 – 14 years was expected to attend. Schools were very strict. Pupils sat in rows at desks and did not move about the classroom without permission until break, lunch or home time. Corporal punishment in the form of the belt or tawse on the hand was the normal form of punishment for misbehaving children. (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-39044445>). If a parent found out that their child had been belted, they would often punish the child again to reinforce the message.

The school day was from 9am to 4pm and would begin with a prayer. Mid-morning pupils would be given a small bottle of milk to drink. There would be a break in the morning and in the afternoon. Many pupils would go home for lunch because their mothers didn't work. Free school lunches were provided for children who were in need. In rural areas, the holidays were arranged around harvest times so that children would be free to work in the fields. There was no set curriculum but children were expected to know how to read, write and do arithmetic. Teaching was done using a blackboard, text books and repetition.

At that time Christianity was the dominant religion in Scotland, with very strong divisions between the various Protestant and Catholic communities. Almost every family attended church at least once a week and children attended Sunday school. Sundays were sacrosanct. Shops were closed and no-one worked. Churches and church-based organisations provided youth clubs and social activities for young people. Even when a young person was old enough to go to dances, they didn't drink alcohol.

There were no television, so newspapers, magazines, radio and cinema provided entertainment, news and information. Common hobbies included reading, sewing,

knitting, jigsaws, card and board games, stamp collecting, music, football and dancing. Children were allowed to play outside on the street or in communal gardens unsupervised. The streets were relatively safe since there was little or no traffic. Older children often had to look after their younger siblings.

Common street games included:

- Skipping
- Football
- Conkers
- Hide and seek
- Tig
- Leap frog
- Marbles
- Ball games
- Diabalo
- Making dens
- Role play and imaginative games
- Carts
- Cats cradles
- Blind Man's buff
- Rounders
- Red Rover/British Bulldog
- Pitch and toss
- What's the time Mr Wolf?
- Yoyo

In good weather children were free to roam wherever they wanted so long as they didn't do anything wrong, didn't get dirty and were home in time for tea. In bad weather, children played indoors. Toys were very gender based. Boys played with toy soldiers, forts and train sets. Girls played with dolls.

Archive Films about children's lives in 1930's Scotland

The following films are from the National Library of Scotland's Moving Image Archive. There are activities linked to each film on the Scotland on Screen website.

- **The Children's Story**

<https://scotlandonscreen.org.uk/browse-films/007-000-000-193-c>

Documentary about the Scottish Education System in 1938

- **The Singing Street: Traditional children's street games**

Collection of children's street games filmed in the back streets of Edinburgh accompanied by traditional children's songs. Includes skipping and ball games. Although filmed in 1951 the games and songs would have been sung in the 1930s.

Clip 1: <https://scotlandonscreen.org.uk/browse-films/007-000-000-135-c>

Clip 2: <https://scotlandonscreen.org.uk/browse-films/007-000-000-137-c>

Clip 3: <https://scotlandonscreen.org.uk/browse-films/007-000-000-139-c>

- **Sunny Days (clip)**

<https://scotlandonscreen.org.uk/browse-films/007-000-000-151-c>

This 1931 clip shows Glasgow children visiting a farm. This was a holiday experience, supported by the Necessitous Children's Holiday Camp Fund, for poor children from the tenements in Glasgow.

- **Tam Trauchle's Troubles (1934)**

A series of fundraising appeal films produced for the Glasgow Necessitous Children's Holiday Camp Fund to raise money to help send poor children on a holiday during the summer break.

Clip 1: Life in a single-end tenement flat in the 1930s

<https://scotlandonscreen.org.uk/browse-films/007-000-000-051-c>

Clip 2: A holiday camp for poor children

<https://scotlandonscreen.org.uk/browse-films/007-000-000-053-c>

Clip 4: Sam and Robert return home from camp

<https://scotlandonscreen.org.uk/browse-films/007-000-000-057-c>

Kirkcaldy and linoleum

Linoleum (or lino) is a type of floorcovering which is made from linseed oil and other biodegradable materials. It dates back to the 1860s. It was very popular up until the 1960's when it started to be replaced by the more durable but less environmentally friendly, PVC.

For over a century, Kirkcaldy was the biggest producer of linoleum in the world. The company was Michael Nairn & Co who are still in production today, albeit on a much smaller scale.

In 1913, Mary Campbell Smith wrote the famous Scots poem 'The Boy in the Train' (<https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poem/boy-train/>) which mentions the distinctive smell from the linoleum factories that hung over Kirkcaldy:

I'll sune be ringin' ma Gran'ma's bell,
She'll cry, 'Come ben, my laddie',
For I ken mysel' by the queer-like smell
That the next stop's Kirkcaddy!

During WWII, the factory changed its production from floorcovering to munitions and fuel tanks. The size of the factories made them ideal for producing the largest non-atomic bombs used in the war.

Article: Kirkcaldy: Linoleum capital of the world <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-edinburgh-east-fife-44128557>

Article with video clips: The Town that Floored the World
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p067bcv3>

War comes (1 min 47 secs)

The role of women before the war

Before the war, a woman's place was in the home. Unmarried women could go to work with their parents' permission but the choice of career was very limited. They

could work in shops, factories, offices and farms or as nurses. There were some exceptions who worked in science or as doctors or lawyers but they were very few. Once married, they were expected to leave work to start a family and look after their husband and home. Young women were supposed to only get married with their parents' consent. Those who didn't have permission either had to give up on the relationship or elope.

Reserved Occupations

Mary's mother tried to protect her from being conscripted by getting her a job in a factory. Despite the need for abled bodied people for the military, Britain still had to keep going essential business and services going. So, there were key jobs that were protected from conscription.

The list of jobs that were exempt from military conscription changed during the war as the need for abled bodied men to fight changed. There were many reserved occupations in engineering because the work was essential and could only be done by trained and experienced people. Thus, people who already worked in factories and mills were believed to be safe from being called up. Some parents, who had experienced horrors of the First World War, got their children jobs in factories and mills to try to protect them.

However even those who were in reserved occupations could be called up, if they had skills that the army needed. Moreover, many, like Mary, chose to volunteer despite their protected status. For some it was for duty, for others for the adventure, for Mary it was just to escape a job she hated.

Preparing for War

In her interview Mary mentions that they knew there was going to be a war in 1938.

World War II didn't just happen overnight. The Government and the public had been aware of the rise of Adolf Hitler and fascism in Germany and the possibility of war for several years. During the late 1930s, the British government began to prepare the British population for war. The experience of WWI had taught them the need to protect the public from bombing raids and poisoned gas.

- How Britain prepared for air raids in the Second World War
<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/how-britain-prepared-for-air-raids-in-the-second-world-war>

GAS MASKS

Gas masks were issued in 1938, and over 44 million had been distributed by the outbreak of war in September 1939.

- ARP Schools How to use a gas mask
<https://scotlandonscreen.org.uk/browse-films/007-000-000-015-c>

AIR RAID WARDENS SERVICE

The Air Raid Wardens Service was set up in 1937 Wardens were responsible for reporting incidents, reassuring the public and providing **Air Raid Precautions (ARP)** advice. They were also expected to extinguish small fires, administer first aid and

investigate reports of unexploded bombs. The Women's Voluntary Service was set up in 1938 to involve women in ARP.

- Tenement Warden (clip) Advice on how to respond to the threat of air raids <https://scotlandonscreen.org.uk/browse-films/007-000-000-235-c>
- Anti-gas precautions in Glasgow (clip) World War II training film <https://scotlandonscreen.org.uk/browse-films/007-000-000-029-c>

AIR RAID SHELTERS

The materials for air raid shelters began to be sent out in 1938.

- World War 2 Air Raid Shelters: Facts and Information <https://primaryfacts.com/504/world-war-2-air-raid-shelters-facts-and-information/>

BLACKOUT

As war approached people began preparing homes and factories for blackout. From 1 September 1939, the blackout was enforced to prevent light from towns or cities being used by enemy bombers to locate their targets. Street lights and illuminated signs were kept off at night. Headlights from cars and buses were dimmed and cyclists couldn't have a very small part of their rear light showing. Curtains, cardboard and paint were used to cover windows and doors to prevent light being seen from houses, offices, factories or shops. People could be fined if they did not comply.

- ARP A Reminder for Peacetime - Amateur film about a Glasgow family preparing for the black-out <https://scotlandonscreen.org.uk/browse-films/007-000-000-315-c>

Barrage Balloons (2 mins 38 secs)

Women in WWII

When able bodied men left their jobs to fight on the front lines, women were called upon to fill the gaps in the workforce at home. All unmarried women aged 20-30, (later extended to 19-43), now had to either join the armed forces, work in a factory or work on the land with the Women's Land Army. Women grasped the chance not only to play their part in the war effort but also for the freedom to do new and more interesting jobs. From bus driving to engineering in factories, from agriculture to military work, the war opened up a new world of work to women.

WAAF – the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (<http://www.waafassociation.org.uk/>)

FANYS – First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (<https://www.fany.org.uk/>)

WRNS – Women's Royal Naval Service (<https://wrens.org.uk/>)

ATS - Auxiliary Territorial Service

ATA – Air Transport Auxillary (<https://atamuseum.org/>)

WLA – Women's Land Army (Land Girls)

(<https://forestryandland.gov.scot/learn/heritage/world-war-two/womens-timber-corps>)

WTC – Women's Timber Corps (Lumber Jills) (<https://www.womenslandarmy.co.uk/>)

ENSA – Entertainments National Service Association

SOE – Special Operations Executive <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/seven-stories-from-special-operations-executive>

- The Women who fought the Nazis: Battle of Britain Part 2
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cb4VNKdRnHI>
- Women at War: The Role of Women During WW2 (from East Midlands Archive)
<https://www.mylearning.org/stories/women-at-war-the-role-of-women-during-ww2/478>
- Train To Win: Training and employment of women engineers during the Second World War. Training women to work in munitions factories.

Clip 1 <https://scotlandonscreen.org.uk/browse-films/007-000-002-427-c>

Clip 2 <https://scotlandonscreen.org.uk/browse-films/007-000-002-429-c>

- Secret sacrifice: the agents who risked all behind Nazi lines
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/31/secret-sacrifice-the-agents-who-risked-all-behind-nazi-lines?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

BARRAGE BALLOONS

When Mary volunteered for the war effort, she was posted to No 18 Balloon Centre at Bishopbriggs, as part of the WAAF. Her responsibilities not only involved sewing and maintaining barrage balloons but also sending them up during air raids and retrieving them afterwards. It was an important job. Barrage balloons were used to defend ground targets against aircraft attack.

A barrage balloon is large kite balloon that is raised and lowered from a winch on the ground. It works by raising steel cables in to the air which pose a severe collision risk to aircraft, making the enemy's approach more difficult.

The aerodynamic shape of the kite balloon and the cables around its surface keep it stable and reduce the drag effect of wind compared to a circular balloon. Some barrage balloons carried small explosive charges that would be pulled up against the attacking aircraft to ensure its destruction.

The use of barrage balloons was limited by the weight of the cable so they weren't practical against very high-altitude flying aircraft.

- WWII Barrage Balloon Deployment Film Women's Auxiliary Air Force 47334
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-xllr_HolGU
- WAAF Barrage Balloon School
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6sDzeTk8Xug>

- Balloons Issue Title – Here's How (1940)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BleFX3ZSSz0>
- Life in the WAAF 1942-1946
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/48/a3870948.shtml>

OPERATION OUTWARD

In September 1940, a gale caused several barrage balloons to come loose and they flew across the North Sea to Sweden and Denmark and caused lots of damage to powerlines, antennae and railways. When Churchill heard of the damage and chaos caused, he ordered an investigation into the use of free flying balloons as weapons against Germany.

It was found that free flying balloons could be used to attack Germany without them being able to retaliate with their own balloons because the wind usually only blew in one direction, from west to east. Balloons with thin trailing cables could cause great damage to electricity pylons and cables. Furthermore, if the balloons carried incendiary devices (firebombs), these could set off fires in Germany's vast forests and heathlands. This would cause the enemy to divert large numbers of people to fire-watching instead of more productive work. Since surplus weather balloons could be used, the cost of the operation would be low and only a small number of personnel would be needed for a relatively safe task. Therefore, in September 1941, Operation Outward was given the go-ahead. It was a joint naval operation and so women from the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) were involved alongside Royal Marines.

- Operation Outward: Britain's WWII Balloon Attacks Against Nazi Germany
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZnSNddPjG6A>

The Everyday (5 min 52 secs)

Many like every young person in Britain had to adapt to life in war time Britain. Food and clothing was rationed. At night ARP wardens patrolled the streets checking that households and factories were keeping to the blackout. Needless to say, there were lots of accidents as people walked about outside in blackout conditions. Everyone was supposed to carry their gas masks with them at all times and to go to the nearest shelter when the air raid sirens sounded.

- A Schoolboy's War: Near Glasgow
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/86/a2765586.shtml>
- An Air Raid Incident from World War Two
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/70/a2869770.shtml>

Despite all of this, people were able to go to dances, out to cafes and restaurants and to the cinema.

Going to the **cinema**, was the most popular leisure time activity during the war. It not only entertained the nation but provided important news and information about the war effort. A typical cinema programme might include two feature films (one high budget film known as an A – movie, and a low budget, B-Movie) as well as newsreels, short cartoons, an episode of a serial story and government information films or adverts. Tickets were cheap so it was an activity that was readily available to most

people, including children. Cinemas were warm and provided a great escape from households and billets that were full of people. No wonder Mary was disappointed when she was not allowed to go.

- Going to the pictures: British Cinema and the Second World War https://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/2810/1/Glancy_Going_to_the_pictures.pdf
- The BFI has a free online collection of films called 'The Home Front' <https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/collection/the-home-front>
This collection includes propaganda films, newsreels, documentaries, trailers and charity appeals as well as amateur films which give an insight into life on the domestic front.

Listening and performing to **music** and **dancing** were other very popular activities. For the British troops at home and abroad, dances and concerts were put on by ENSA (Entertainments National Service Association). From 1940 ENSA also started to provide entertainment for civilian workers too.

- Popular Pastimes and Entertainment in the Second World War <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/popular-pastimes-and-entertainment-in-the-second-world-war>

Convalescent Blues

In her interview Mary mentions saving money to take wounded soldiers out for a meal. The men wore what was known as 'convalescent blues' - blue uniforms and red ties. This blue uniform served several functions. It was a means of maintaining cleanliness and discipline in the hospital. It helped to distinguish between recovering soldiers and medical and administrative staff. Different coloured armbands helped to categorise the different levels of health condition and recovery of the patients. In public, the uniforms performed a propaganda function by putting wounded soldiers on very obvious public display.

- The Convalescent Blues <http://blog.wellcomelibrary.org/2010/06/the-convalescent-blues-in-frederick-cayley-robinsons-acts-of-mercy/>

VE Day (mins secs)

Victory in Europe on the 8 May 1945 was the end of hostilities in Europe. The Allied Forces had accepted Nazi Germany's unconditional surrenders. However, despite the celebrations in Europe, it wasn't the end of WWII. That didn't happen until the Japanese who surrendered. Victory over Japan Day (VJ Day) and the end of World War II is commemorated on the 15 August.

- VE Day <https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/collection/ve-day>
A BFI collection of professional and amateur films of the VE Day and Victory over Japan Day celebrations on the days and in the months afterwards.