

**Box 12. Silence of Women**



## List of contents

A number of items in the box are original pieces and are over a 100-years-old.

### Please handle with care.

1. Sweetheart pincushion
2. Sweetheart brooch from South Wales Borderers
3. Suffragette brooch
4. Thimble – please note this is an original and dates back to 1896
5. Photograph inside the box of suffragettes
6. Sewing book – domestic contribution to war effort with Zappar link to knitting song “*I Wonder Who’s Knitting For Me*”, extract from *The Last Post* Community Play, Head4Arts

## Key information

- Women played an important role in the Allies winning the war. Britain’s female population was mobilised to support the war effort. In contrast Germany’s was not and this might have been one of the key reasons they were defeated.
- WW1 brought huge changes for women, with society missing a large portion of men who had gone to fight, new job opportunities opened up. Prior to the war women were already working in industry such as textiles; others were in service. But the shell crisis in 1915, meant that women were actively drafted to work in munitions factories and by the end of the war almost a million women worked in this industry. Other occupations for women during the war were in transport - as bus conductors, ticket collectors, porters, carriage cleaners and bus drivers. The numbers of women working on the railways increased from 9,000 to 50,000. The increase in women working also meant there was an increase in the demand for childcare.
- Working women started to enjoy the camaraderie of being at work and many munitions factories developed women’s football teams.
- **Suffragettes:** For many years prior to the war suffragettes had been active in trying to secure rights for women. The brooch in this box is an original suffragette brooch. All suffragette brooches have these three specific colours: purple to symbolise dignity, white for purity and green for hope. These colours were used for banners, flags, rosettes and badges.
- During the war the Suffragettes ceased their militant actions for women’s rights. Instead some of them chose to support the war effort in a number of different ways: 1914 saw the first women police officers, becoming known in 1915 as the WPS (Women Police Service). This was made up of volunteers from the suffragette movement. One of their tasks was to patrol parks and cinemas to make sure women were behaving correctly with men. The Deputy in charge of this was a Welsh woman from Cardiff: Mary Sophia Allen who eventually became Commandant of the WPS. She had previously been arrested for being one of the women who stormed parliament and was imprisoned for smashing windows in a number of places including the Home Office and the Inland Revenue. Sylvia Pankhurst was opposed to the war and in 1914 broke away from the WSPU (Women’s Social and Political Union).
- Over 100,000 women joined Britain’s armed forces during WW1. At the start of the war there was a call for a Women’s Army and in 1916 the WAAC (Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps) was established, although they were first sent to the front line as cooks and waitresses. Renamed

Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps, over 57,000 women served in it between 1916 and 1918. It was the first established but was shortly followed by The Women's Naval Service in 1917 and Women's Air Service in April 1918.

- **Nurses:** Played a huge role in the war, both at home and on the front line in field hospitals. At the start of the war the role of nursing was unregulated, but this gradually changed. They initially signed up to be nursing sisters and Voluntary Aid Detachment V.A.D. The National Archives has some 15,000 WW1 Service records for nurses.
- **A small number of women served as a qualified doctors at the front line.** One example is Isabella Stenhouse who qualified as a doctor in Edinburgh in 1913. To begin with, the British army would not accept a woman doctor so she served with the French army at the front line from 1915. By 1916 the shortage of male doctors meant she was able to serve with the British army. She went on to serve in Malta and Egypt until the end of the war. Isabella's story has been hidden from the historical record along with the other women doctors.  
See *The Mystery of Isabella and the String of Beads: a woman doctor in World War 1*, Katrina Kirkwood, 2016
- **Sweetheart Brooches** – when service men went off to war, they wanted to leave something behind for their loved ones to remember them by, as a reminder that home was always in their hearts. A sweetheart brooch depicted the service crest or regimental badge, in a smaller scale. The brooch in this box relates to the South Wales Borderers Regiment. The name sweetheart implies that it was just given to their sweetheart, but it was also given to wives, parents, family members and children – anyone the service person was leaving behind. It was worn with pride to show that their 'man' or relative was brave and risking his life for King and Country.
- The **thimble** in the box is an original one dating back to the late 1800's. Whilst waiting for news, women would spend time sewing, repairing and making things to send to their sons and husbands serving during the war.
- The **Sweetheart Pin Cushion** in the box is not an original. Original sweetheart pin cushions are about 6 times the size of this. They were created by men who had been wounded and were recuperating from war injuries as part of their rehabilitation. The cushions were sent home to their loved ones. Materials to make them had to be found, and they used cuts from old uniforms, feed sacks, scrounged threads and cigarette silks which came free in cigarette packs and were small pieces of fabric printed with poems on them. They were stuffed with sawdust or, if it was a sailor making them, with sand. Construction was simple, by putting beads individually on straight pins and then pinning them into the cushion and attaching any trimmings in the same way. One theory for making the decorations in this way was the lack of sewing abilities of the men, another is the limitation of materials they had access to. Messages were spelt out for their loved ones, but the fact that they spent time making them also told the loved ones they were thinking of them and not to forget them.
- The lost generation of men killed during the war, was seen to impact on the number of women who remained single, named 'surplus women.' But the lack of suitable single men was not the only reason women remained single. The war had introduced them to new opportunities, professions such as teaching and medicine, but only if they remained unmarried. Women actively started to choose career over marriage.

**Zappar code**

Download the Zappar app on a smart phone or tablet. Hover over the code below to watch a 2 minute extract from *The Last Post* play with a performance of The Knitting Song.



**Box 12. Silence of Women: questions**



1. What do you think is in this box?
2. Who do you think this belonged to?
3. Why do you think they had it?

4. Who do you think made this pin cushion? Male or female?
5. How have they made it? Are there any messages on it?
6. Why would they give this to another person? What would the message be ?
7. Who is the photograph of?



8. Unwrap one object:

**Thimble**

- What do you think this was used for? Who used it?
- How might they feel using it?

**Suffragette Brooch**

- What do you think the colours on this mean?
- How do you think it felt to wear it?

**Sweetheart Brooch**

- Who do you think wore this?
- Who gave this to them?
- How do you think it felt to wear it?

**Suggested box combinations**

- Box 14 Silence of Surplus Women
- Box 15 Silence of those who helped in different ways
- Box 13 Silence of Religion
- Box 2 Silence of Mourning
- Box 7 Silence of Waiting

**Suggested Activities**

- Create a mind map of all the different things women did during the war. Are you surprised?
- Choose one thing that interests you and create a story about a woman who did that work.

**Caring for the box after use**

- Please re wrap the objects
- Carefully place everything back in the box