

“Aye Ma’am”

Women at War when Stepping Forward into Significant New Roles with BOAC !



www.pooleflyingboats.com

Principally focussed upon: ~

Marinecraft Unit Seawomen
(BOAC's MCU based at Poole)

and . . .

1st Stewardesses with BOAC
(Flying Boats based at Poole
+ Landplanes at Hurn-B'mth)

Poole Flying Boats Celebration (Charity 1123274)



PFBC Archive: *Our Charity is committed to developing and maintaining its Public-Access Archive...*

For the purpose of this website a brief selection of items together with information have been provided where references in blue indicate further material is available. *Á*

Our Project: *‘Women at War when Stepping forward into Significant New Roles with BOAC*
(BOAC's Women Seamen & Stewardesses at Poole in WW2, through to the postwar era)

Part Eta: ***“ The Focus of Other Women ~ In the Local Workforce at Poole ”***

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The **AYE MA'AM Project** was conceived, devised and then undertaken by **PFBC** (with Heritage Lottery Funding)

Besides the emergence of **BOAC's Women Seamen & Stewardesses** in 1943, during WW2 many other Women were significant to the Local Workforce ~ especially Poole's Pottery well-established as **Carter Stabler Adams**.

There were major opportunities in Poole's Shipyards (**Dorset Yacht Co. Lake, British Power Boat Co. & Bolsons**); also the Munitions' Factories of the **Royal Naval Cordite Factory** at Holton Heath set up during the Great War, and the **Royal Ordnance Factory** at Creekmoor, manufacturing weaponry & bullets (which operated 1940-48).

In fact, wherever there were expansions occurring in the local workforce ~ and /or vacancies arising from the departure of men principally for the armed forces, ranging from the estate workers on **Brownsea Island** to the staff within **Bournemouth's Hotels**, women (and younger men leaving school) were recruited to fill the posts ! Meanwhile, there were often queues of women locally at the various Recruiting Offices for the Armed Forces.

This phenomenal 'sea change' for Women was not particular to just Poole, for it was *taking place* Nationwide...

The expansion in job opportunities was a most welcome development for women locally despite the wartime. Indeed, a key feature in the prewar years here with a decade of depression were high levels of unemployment, where the only significant employers were the Gasworks, Poole's Pottery, docks & yards, and the fishing fleet. The protectionism which was associated with the Depression had hit old trading seaports like Poole very hard.

Mollie Skinner had been an apprentice at Poole's Pottery immediately before war was declared... and recalled that *just back from Poole's Quayside*, she had worked in an upstairs room looking over towards the Gasworks. The work *painting pottery designs on cards* was interspersed with opportunities, announced by the ringing of a bell, to take tourists around, for which she received tips that by the end of the week exceeded her salary of ten shillings-a-week. The guided tour for 15-20 took in the works, the potters' wheels, glaze and paint shops, the kilns, & finally the Showrooms followed by the Tea Rooms. 'None of the hostess uniforms of later years !' [*She remembered a particular faux-pas, in mentioning Cornish Clay from China, rather than China Clay from Cornwall...*]

Despite Poole's Pottery being an old-fashioned factory with grime + all, 'it was a happy place and a real factory', but Mollie reluctantly decided to leave, at a time when demand was slack, and before work became very busy: " At last I felt that I should go on to some sort of war work, we were only working three days a week & people were being called up... So I joined the Fire Service as a telephonist and was asked to go to the Bournemouth Surveyor's Office (a Mr. Cowling) to use set squares, French curves etc. collect the ordnance sheets from the various Council Offices eg Christchurch, Mudeford and Bournemouth , trace them and when the prints came back to the Office I painted in water supply lines, underground pipes, buildings of high fire risk, churches etc."

Yet, as already noted in [Alpha 1](#) (in this Website), Mollie eventually joined BOAC as a trainee Women Seaman !
[Ref. ... Correspondence between Mollie & Archivist Leslie Hayward... dated 16th Sept. 1966]

As 1943 progressed plans were being prepared for 1944 and for the Liberation of France from Nazi occupation, so that besides recruitment for a range of BOAC posts, women workers were also being employed in shipyards.



Courtesy of Harold Bennett

This was both skilled and strenuous work where each team of 5 women workers was responsible for the *Landing Craft Tank* which they assembled. So that Bolson's Shipyard with many such teams could deliver these at the rate of one per week, in the build-up for D-Day, and other campaigns...



Courtesy of Harold Bennett

Photos: Above, women workers at Bolson's main Shipyard in teams of five for building Landing Craft Tank (LTCs). LCT A835 is pictured here being constructed in 1943...

Right, LCTs moored alongside the yard, by the Sterte inlet of the Backwater Channel entrance of Holes Bay

*Photograph of Vera Rose Rae, in WW2:
Courtesy of Bournemouth Evening Echo*

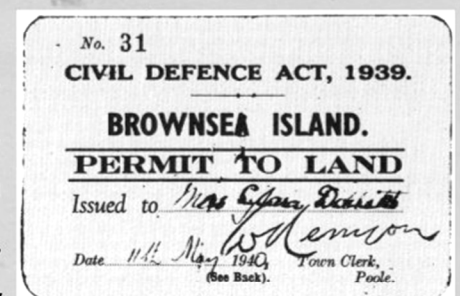


Vera Rose Rae working in the Gardens at Upton House in the Summer of 1942... She worked there during the war, having trained at the Seale Hayne Agricultural College near Newton Abbot. After her death a tree was planted in her Memory.

Here the UK & its Allies (significantly including the USA since the final days of 1941 with the attack upon Pearl Harbour), would be taking the initiative after years considering the enormity of launching an invasion on German-held N. France. The 'darkest hours' for the UK had come in the Spring of 1940 with 'shattering suddenness' thro' the loss to the enemy of Norway and Denmark, followed by the Low Countries, and finally N. France, where the 'Blitzkrieg rolled up the map of Western Europe' leading to the evacuation of Dunkirk of nearly 2000,000 soldiers of the [British Expeditionary Force](#). There were also *circa* 140,000 French & Belgian troops evacuated, ahead of which there was [a surge of civilian refugees](#). With a variety of vessels, the bulk of the refugees were landed at Folkestone, Southampton, Weymouth, and also [Poole](#) where mainly [Dutch + Belgians](#) were landed on [Brownsea Is.](#) to a hastily erected [Refugee Camp](#) of wooden huts & tents. Many of these refugees had been German-born Jewish families who had already relocated to the Low Countries prewar. Subsequently, these refugees would have to seek work (inc. the women) to support themselves when cleared & moved elsewhere ~ initially on the clear undertaking that such jobs would be vacated by them at the end of current hostilities! *[Of those processed (a lengthy process) a couple of infiltrators/spies were unearthed & were dealt with by appropriate Authorities.]*

Involved in the *processing* of these refugees, was just one, young Immigration Officer based at Poole - with his Office in a converted greengrocer's shop with his flat above, where his wife acted as office worker, secretary & sandwich-maker, for he had little time to take a break during a day, travelling between Poole, the [Haven Hotel](#) at Sandbanks & Brownsea. *[The Haven Hotel at the time was still the main hub for passengers who travelled with Imperial's Flying Boats, and then with BOAC.]* The crisis, which resulted in the influx of refugees, that was so significant to Poole, as a result gave various women the unexpected opportunity of employment, working in support of the well-being & future of those in Brownsea's Camp... For the enclosed community of three thousand people required much - from welfare & schooling, to medical provision. There was also voluntary effort from Poole Women's Voluntary Service and senior Girl Guides.

The picture in the Christie Family Collection, depicts this well - and the Permit (*see inset*), courtesy of the book 'Brownsea Islander' by Jack Battrick *via* Gail Lawson (pub. PHT 1978), which was issued to a woman employee at the Camp (*sadly with an undecipherable name*) bear testimony to the motley flotilla moored by the Wych Channel in the lee of the island, *packed to the gunnels* (as it were) with personal belongings all of which required scrutiny.



This serves as an example of how the circumstance of War - and the actions needed to meet the situations that arose, In inestimable instances progressed the opportunity for women to enter the workplace and thereby acquire new skills, whilst for others it gave opportunities in their existing arenas of work to fill more senior positions (albeit temporarily) ! Labour Exchanges played a role in this, but so did networking thro' relatives, friends & contacts relaying opportunities. This could be on a local basis, but could also involve relocating to another environment new to them & far from home: Wartime brought with it upheavals, significant changes in circumstances, new relationships, perspectives & direction...

IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT

DISPERSAL OF CIVILIAN POPULATION

.....COUNCIL

The Government have announced that the voluntary dispersal of the following classes of persons from this area* to reception areas in other parts of the country shall be put into effect immediately.

1. CHILDREN UNDER 15

Children of this age must be taken by their mothers, or by another responsible adult if their mother cannot go. Only in most exceptional circumstances will children be allowed to go on their own. (EXAMPLE : if neither of their parents can go because of illness and there is no one else to take them.)

2. CHILDREN BETWEEN 15 AND 18 STILL AT SCHOOL FULL-TIME

Children in this class may either go with their mothers or on their own. In exceptional circumstances they may go with another responsible adult. (EXAMPLE : a handicapped child whose mother is too ill to go.)

3. CHILDREN BETWEEN 15 AND 18 WHO HAVE LEFT SCHOOL

Children in this class should go on their own. Only in exceptional circumstances may they be accompanied. (EXAMPLE : if they are handicapped, or if the mother is taking younger children.)

4. EXPECTANT MOTHERS

5. BLIND, CRIPPLED OR AGED AND INFIRM PEOPLE only if they are dependent on the care of a person who is a member of the classes mentioned above and who is travelling under the scheme.

Special arrangements are being made for the dispersal of children under the age of 18 who are resident at boarding schools, homes or other similar establishments. Parents who do not wish their children to take part in such arrangements should immediately contact the establishments.

Children in the care of a local authority who are living with fosterparents are included in the above classes. If their fosterparents are unable to go with them the Child Care Authority should be informed at once.

Anyone living in the area of.....who comes within the above priority classes and wishes to take part in the scheme should go immediately to where they will be given further instructions.

CLERK OF THE COUNCIL

*If only part of the area is within the dispersal scheme, the districts affected are shown below:

Trades & professions passed from the men at war to female counterparts in employment almost imperceptibly: Shopkeepers, tradesmen, milkmen/others making deliveries, those providing transport, instructors & teachers, viz policewomen, local authority employees, ambulance drivers, surveyors + cartographers, as work for women. Perhaps most significant to the War Effort was the intake into various munitions' factories (*see delta 4- part 2*):

Then in December 1941 these changes were increased significantly by the *Conscription of all unmarried women aged between 19 and 30* ... joined by many more married women who enlisted ... so releasing even more men !

The upheavals had also extended to the children who became *evacuees* (*some with their mothers*) in being sent away from vulnerable areas/inner cities and those of strategic importance etc., as the target for heavy bombing. Besides the influx of refugees, evacuees principally from Southampton were moved to Poole and Bournemouth: Schoolboys from *King Ed. VI Sch.* shared the premises of *Poole Grammar Sch.* (with its air-raid shelter in the Park), where lessons could be drowned-out by noise from the Fleet Air Arm's *Walrus Seaplanes* training in the Harbour. Also, within Bournemouth the girls from *St. Anne's R.C. Secondary School* shared with *Talbot Heath CofE School*, whilst the boys from Southampton's *Taunton School*, were placed alongside the *Bournemouth School for Boys*.

Yet both Bournemouth and Poole by the seaside proved not to be 'safe' from the bombing raids of the Luftwaffe, also sneak attacks and strafing, from *Heinkels* etc. returning to N. France (*thwarted*) opting for secondary targets! Further, various military bases in the area and the accumulation of many *Aircrew Volunteers* arriving from abroad, gathering for induction, and accommodated in Bournemouth's Hotels, then became the focus of deadly missions. A total of 2,270 bombs were dropped on Bournemouth, killing 219 + injuring 726 folk & destroying 250 buildings, whereas Poole certainly benefitted from 3 *Starfish sites* used as *decoys*, including *Arne* and *Maryland*, Brownsea. Assessing the number for Dorset of all sorts of bombs, with these falling mainly on Weymouth, Portland & Poole, the total (including incendiaries) was 55,864 principally targeting *shipping, docks, factories, munitions and bases*! Whilst prime targets of the RNCF Holton Heath, ROF Creekmoor + RAF Hamworthy sites escaped, others were hit including the Bourne Valley Gasworks on 27th. March 1941, with 19 dead; along with a total of 47 local residents.

The *darkest day* for Bournemouth was on Sunday, the *23rd. May 1943*, with a devastating bombing raid killing 131, which included 34 airmen at the *Metropole Hotel* (part of No.3 Personnel Reception Centre for Dominion Aircrew); also Central & Eastcliff Court Hotels, the Shamrock Rambler Garage, West's Cinema, the Bobby's & Beales stores etc., as well a children's hostel killing *Matron Julia Hartin* and a child: *War did not preclude civilians and women workers.*

Amongst those lost in the attack, alongside not only the Aircrew on Reception (*some due for RAF Hamworthy ops*) were 6 servicemen from the RN and the Army, together with 6 US infantrymen on leave staying in Bournemouth. There were hotel staff ~ with women employed in admin., catering, and as cleaners, and others staying as guests ! There were women at home amongst the local residents killed, who in some cases were likely enjoying a rest day on a Sunday away from their work, catching up on their housework and spending time with their family members. Also with so many badly injured, just imagine how so many lives were irrevocably changed in a matter of minutes !

(Aimee ~ with acknowledgement to Leslie Hayward & the Harman Family, Harold Bennett, the Echo and Dorset Life Magazine.)