

WOMEN IN THE LDV AND HOME GUARD: A SOURCE LIST

WOMEN IN THE LDV

When the LDV was founded in May 1940, “it had not been the government’s intention that women should join the LDV, but it is clear that local LDV commanders accepted women”.¹ This early and significant involvement of women, led, in June 1940, to an official announcement that women were not allowed to be enrolled in the LDV, but this did little to prevent their involvement on a local level.² As Summerfield and Peniston-Bird write “[women] did not take the rebuff lightly: of all the exclusions...the one that was most vigorously and persistently challenged was that of women.”³

- The Imperial War Museum holds a number of artefacts relating to women in the LDV and Home Guard, including “one album of 130 photographs compiled in the late 1960s or early 1970s of agency photographs of ARP services... [and] women forming their own corps of Local Defence Volunteers.” This is not currently digitised.⁴
- The Upper Thames Patrol (UTP) which became part of the LDV and, later, the Home Guard, actively took women on as drivers in 1940 after struggling with recruitment. The officer in command of A2 (Shore) Company wrote that, “I had come across dozens of women who were anxious to do something beyond the rather colourless activities of the WVS; and had even most illegally roped in one invaluable one as my sort of office second-in-command...I held a meeting at Wallingford on August 29, recruited about forty women...designed a uniform, organised map-reading classes (at which they proved extraordinarily good) and evolved a scheme for mobilisation of the whole Company.”⁵
- Ann Godden was 15 when the call for LDV members was aired. Her father had taught her to shoot and in response to the broadcast “he said, ‘Come on, get up, get your coat, we’re going to enlist you know.’ So I got my coat and we went and enlisted just like that...The police sergeant, he said ‘We don’t want women.’ And Dad said, ‘Yes you do, she can shoot as well as any man,’ and so they took me.”⁶
- In May 1940, Joan Hardy became secretary to Colonel Meinertzhagen who ran the War Office’s LDV. She joined and was taught to shoot and make Molotov cocktails. When Meinertzhagen retired, Hardy became secretary to Lt.-Col. Sir Edward Frederick, Commander in Chief of the London Home Guard, during which time she took part in Home Guard operations in London parks.⁷
- The Hon. Gladys Murry joined the LDV, a contemporary newspaper article records that, “Herself an excellent marksman, she “enlisted” immediately the call was made for volunteers. “I am not anxious to shoot Germans,” she said, “but I would willingly assist in eliminating the danger to our women and children by shooting any that tried to invade us.”

¹ Stephen M. Cullen, *In Search of the Real Dad’s Army: The Home Guard and the Defence of the United Kingdom 1940-1944* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2011), 115.

² Cullen, *In Search of the Real Dad’s Army*, 115.

³ Penny Summerfield and Corinna Peniston-Bird, *Contesting Home Defence: Men, Women and the Home Guard in the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 63.

⁴ *Civil Defence 1940: Women’s Defence Volunteers and ARP Services*, Ministry of Information Second World War Press Agency Print Collection, Imperial War Museum, London, GSA 529.

⁵ Graves, Charles *The Home Guard of Britain* (London: Hutchinson, 1943), 342-3.

⁶ From a project interview with Ann Godden, quoted in Summerfield and Peniston-Bird, *Contesting Home Defence*, 74.

⁷ From a project interview with Joan Hardy, quoted in Summerfield and Peniston-Bird, *Contesting Home Defence*, 78.

It was this thought that prompted Miss Murray to hand in her name to the local police office".⁸

WOMEN IN THE HOME GUARD

This same pattern of unofficial involvement continued when the LDV became the Home Guard in August 1940. By the end of 1942, the Home Guard had 1.8 million serving members. "Officially, there was not a woman among them. Unofficially, women had been trained in the firing of rifles and been helping to run the administration of HG units since they began."⁹ In fact, the government itself believed that some 50,000 women were serving in the organisation.¹⁰ Due to the unofficial nature of these women, there are few substantial records of their involvement and very little representation of them in popular culture of the period (or in subsequent years), leading to the mistaken belief that women were less present and participatory than is actually the case.¹¹

Women were officially accepted into the Home Guard after a parliamentary debate late in 1942. They were initially known as 'nominated women' and later, from 1944, as auxiliaries. They were not issued with a uniform (except a plastic badge) and were not allowed to train with, or handle, weapons. This did not stop them, as Stephen Cullen notes: "Despite the government ban on women in the Home Guard on equal terms to men, there is plenty of evidence that women were, in fact, incorporated into some units on equal terms. Ironically, the clearest evidence relates to government ministries' own Home Guard units."¹²

- Mary Warschauer was a code and cipher clerk at the Air Ministry in London, she remembers that: "We had a Home Guard there. There were men, and women as well. There were about ten to twelve women, and about twenty men. And we went to practice rifle shooting...We wore air force blue, navy blue dungarees and little Glengarry type hats, both the men and the women wore the same thing"¹³
- The Imperial War Museum holds ten photos (one digitised) of the Medical Section of the Moortown Home Guard, Leeds taken in 1944. These show the inclusion of women in the section, who "carried out the full range of Home Guard activities and were trained in the use of firearms".¹⁴
- An image in the Hulton Getty Archive shows a Sergeant of the 9th Battalion, Buckinghamshire Home Guard inspecting members of the Women's Home Guard who are undertaking rifle drill on 4th November 1941 in Slough.¹⁵
- Edith Summerskill, Labour MP and an ardent supporter of women's rights and a campaigner for gender equality in wartime, insisted on joining the Parliamentary Home Guard as a point of principle and was allowed to, participating in weapons drill with them.¹⁶

⁸ *Perthshire Advertiser*, 25 May 1940, 7.

⁹ Neil R. Storey, *The Home Guard* (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2009), 39.

¹⁰ S. P. Mackenzie, *The Home Guard; A Military and Political History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 127.

¹¹ Summerfield and Peniston-Bird, *Contesting Home Defence*, 141.

¹² Cullen, *In Search of the Real Dad's Army*, 116-117.

¹³ Mary Warschauer (Oral History), Imperial War Museum, London, 16762.

¹⁴ The Moortown Home Guard, Mrs L Williams Collection, Imperial War Museum, London, 8205-19.

¹⁵ *Women's Home Guard*, Hulton Archive, Getty Images, huty27429_53. Accessed: 20/9/23

<https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/sergeant-of-the-9th-battalion-buckinghamshire-home-guard-news-photo/1313466572>

¹⁶ P. Brookes, *Women at Westminster: An Account of Women in the British Parliament 1918-1966* (London: Peter Davies, 1967), 139.

- In October 1941, *The Daily Mail* reported that fifty women had been training with the Home Guard at a 'war factory' in Tolworth, Surrey. They took part in marching, rifle drill and were on parade four nights a week the same as the men.¹⁷
- A series of cartoons produced by Captain F.C. Saxon, Commanding Officer of the Sixth Battalion of the Cheshire Home Guard show women's involvement with his unit, including weapons training.¹⁸
- "In September 1942 a Home Guard Directorate Conference was told that the order of the Commander in Chief Home Forces that women were not to be trained in the use of arms was being ignored and the Command representatives present were told that any breach of this order would be dealt with as a disciplinary offence. This threat of sanctions, which was widely disseminated, would hardly have been necessary if there had not been ample evidence of Home Guard units training women in handling arms."¹⁹
- An article in *The Daily Herald* about women being officially allowed to join the Home Guard in certain roles, notes that: "Officially the "unofficial" Home Guardettes were permitted to do only clerical duties, driving and cooking. But there was nothing to stop Home Guards teaching them to shoot or hurl a grenade. Many learned to shoot so well that at a match held by a thousand of the crack, unofficial women Home Guard shots the winner, Miss Thomas, Edinburgh ARP Warden, won with ten bulls' eyes out of ten!"²⁰
- In an article about the Women's Home Defence 1942 shooting contest, it is noted that one of the finalists, Miss M. Wilson, of Worsley, England, a Lancashire shooting champion, and Gold Cross holder "was a Home Guard instructor at the beginning of the war".²¹
- A Hulton Getty image from October 1941 shows a uniformed group of women in modified Home Guard uniforms marching. The location is given as a factory in the south of England and the title states that the group "undertake regular rifle drill with the aim of home defence".²²
- A photograph in the American Bettmann archive from November 1941 shows a young woman with a Tommy gun. The original caption reads "Miss E. Blakeley, a clerk, makes a striking picture as she practices with a Tommy-gun during a drill of the women municipal workers of Bermondsey, London, who are being trained as local home guards."²³

¹⁷ *Daily Mail*, 29 October 1941.

¹⁸ Private Papers of Captain F C Saxon OBE, Imperial War Museum, London, Documents.7462.

¹⁹ Brian D. Osborne, *The People's Army: Home Guard in Scotland 1940-1944* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2009), 144-145.

²⁰ *Daily Herald*, 6 March 1943, 4.

²¹ *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 5 December 1942, 4.

²² *Women's Home Guard*, Hulton Archive, Getty Images, huty1604613. Accessed: 14/11/24

<https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/group-of-factory-girls-in-the-south-of-england-who-style-news-photo/77509400>

²³ Englishwoman Ready to Guard Her Home, Bettmann, Getty Images, U627652ACME. Accessed 14/11/24

<https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/miss-e-blakeley-a-clerk-makes-a-striking-picture-as-she-news-photo/514912824>

WOMEN IN OTHER CIVILIAN DEFENCE

A number of all-female civil defence units were formed that mirrored the LDV and Home Guard but bore alternative names. These included the:

Amazon Defence Corps

Formed by Venetia Foster in London in the summer of 1940, "its objectives were to 'obtain training for women in the use and handling of firearms and other weapons of defence' and to secure equal membership of the LDV."

- The Imperial War Museum holds a photograph of the group undergoing weapons training. Part of the Press Agency Print Collection, the original wartime description reads: "The Amazons Defence Corps, the unofficial arm of women parashots who, because of their sex, are barred from the Local Defence Volunteers, is spreading all over the country. Some of the best shots among them are instructing the LDV. Mrs Venetia Foster shows members of her class the right spot at which to aim at a parachutist."²⁴
- The Getty Underwood Archives hold a photograph of the Corps carrying out weapons training using a selection of sticks and umbrellas and one of women being trained in ju-jitsu.²⁵

Women's Home Defence

Formed in Bristol in 1940, its founder Miss Watson-Williams later joined forces with MPs Mavis Tate and Edith Summerskill and the Amazon Defence Corps to create a national organisation.²⁶ There was no uniform, but an enamel WHD badge was issued and members underwent training including with weapons. In December 1941, Summerskill reported on the organisation to parliament, stating, amongst other things, that: "The unit in Edinburgh is so strong that it cannot take any more women because there are not enough instructors."²⁷

The organisation was never officially recognised and in 1942, the War Office went as far as trying to suggest that their operation was illegal. However, the WHD had popular support on their side and by 1943 there were 250 units across the UK.²⁸ Many of these WHD units worked closely with the Home Guard, receiving training from them and carrying out joint exercises.

²⁴ *Amazons Barred from LDV Arrange Own Wartime Training*, Ministry of Information Second World War Press Agency Print Collection, Imperial War Museum, London, HU 36270.

²⁵ London's Amazon Defence Corps, Underwood Archive, Getty Images, T1666681_134. Accessed: 26/9/23 <https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/twenty-units-of-the-amazon-defense-corps-have-been-trained-news-photo/143126683>; London's Amazon Defence Corps, Underwood Archive, Getty Images, T1666681_135. Accessed: 26/9/23 <https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/twenty-units-of-the-amazon-defense-corps-have-been-trained-news-photo/143126682>

²⁶ Summerfield and Peniston-Bird, *Contesting Home Defence*, 66.

²⁷ Home Guard, 18 December 1941. *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 376 (1941), col. 2157. Accessed: 17/9/23 <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1941-12-18/debates/1b1114b3-5f94-4736-b0ce-f5d98b8b1edc/HomeGuard>

²⁸ Summerfield and Peniston-Bird, *Contesting Home Defence*, 71-73.

- There are two photographs in the Hulton Getty archive showing members of the Streatham Hill section of the Women's Home Defence Corps being trained to use Sten guns by Corporal Holme-Parker of the Home Guard in September 1942.²⁹
- Louie White, a factory worker in Leeds, recorded in her diary that members of the 9th West Riding Home Guard regularly delivered rifle training to her WHD group as well as working with them and issuing them with uniform denims, which she altered to fit.³⁰
- A report in *The Yorkshire Post and Leeds Mercury* from 1942, records that "The question of official recognition of the 250 units of Women's Home Defence, most of which were said to be working with the Home Guard was raised by Sir Frank Sanderson".³¹
- In 1941, *The Scotsman* reported on the activities of the Edinburgh Women's Home Defence: "Edinburgh is the only city in Scotland to boast such an organisation...It was very awe-inspiring, when my friend and I stealthily descended the dark staircase of the Masonic rifle range in Castle Terrace, on our first visit. We were met by a cheery body of women in navy slacks and jumpers over white blouses, topped by a navy beret...Enough of the shooting, we were whisked away to Bruntsfield school for drill. Receiving the same training as the Home Guard...The recruits were knocked into shape by the only male present, a member of the Home Guard with a sense of humour, and a remarkable quality of patience."³²
- The Edinburgh WHD are also mentioned in an article in *The Sunday Post*, which notes that, "War Office regulations do not permit women to carry firearms...Barred from using regulation rifles, E.W.H.D.C. members have done the next best thing, formed a miniature rifle club. Proof of their ability and enthusiasm is shown by the fact that in a match against an Edinburgh Home Guard unit they beat the men by 880 points to 804."³³
- A letter to the *Sevenoaks Chronicle and Kentish Advertiser* publicising the Badgers Mount unit of the WHD. notes that, "We formed this unit last November, having our first meeting on November 10, since then, with the help of the Home Guard, we have become quite efficient in musketry, and dummy-bomb throwing. We are also taking first-aid, field cooking and message- carrying"³⁴
- Two images from the *Daily Mirror*, October 1943 show groups of women being trained in physical combat and shooting by uniformed members of the Home Guard. They both bear similar titles, one noting that "The London Savings Bank are now running a Women's Home Defence Unit and are being trained by the Company of Home Guards from The Bank Unit. Their training includes Physical fitness and training, unarmed combat, Signalling and Shooting."³⁵

²⁹ Women's Home Defence Corps in Wartime, Hulton Archive, Getty Images, huty2816812. Accessed: 17/9/23 <https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/corporal-holme-parker-of-the-home-guard-instructs-two-news-photo/1355295780>; Women's Home Defence Corps in Wartime, Hulton Archive, Getty Images, huty2816813. Accessed: 17/9/23 <https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/female-members-of-the-streatham-hill-section-of-the-womens-news-photo/1355295820>

³⁰ Private Papers of Mrs L White, Imperial War Museum, London, Documents.3347

³¹ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Mercury*, 9 December 1942.

³² *Scotsman*, 10 October 1941, 7.

³³ *Sunday Post*, 15 February 1942, 2.

³⁴ *Sevenoaks Chronicle and Kentish Advertiser*, 27 February 1942, 5.

³⁵ The London Savings Bank are now running a Women's Home Defence Unit, Mirropix, 01445078. Accessed: 14/11/24 <https://www.mirropix.com/id/01445078>; Women Home Defence Unit, Mirropix, 01441303. Accessed: 14/11/24 <https://www.mirropix.com/id/01445078>

- An image from the Popperfoto Archive shows members of the WHD being rifle trained by a member of the Home Guard in September 1942. Unfortunately, the location does not appear to have been recorded.³⁶

TO INVESTIGATE FURTHER

Majorie Adams (Oral History), Imperial War Museum, London, 7295

Description: "British civilian host to evacuees, Local Defence Volunteer and member of Women's Voluntary Service in Wolverton, Bucks 1939-1945" This record is not available online.

³⁶September 1942. Women of the Women's Home Defence Corp practise small arms fire, Popperfoto via Getty Images, PPP30166730. Accessed: 14/11/24 <https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/war-and-conflict-world-war-two-pic-september-1942-women-of-news-photo/78951670>