

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 58

WVS BADGE

This badge of the Women's Voluntary Service came from Corrairigh, Cornaigbeg. Formed in 1938, the WVS is in the news again today because of their withdrawal from the Tiree Meals-on-Wheels service.

The Women's Voluntary Service for Air Raid Precautions Services was set up in 1938 by a remarkable woman, Lady Reading, at the request of the Home Secretary. Stella Isaacs had been born into a wealthy family in Turkey. Her father lost his fortune in the First World War and she trained as a secretary, joining the staff of the Viceroy of India, the Earl of Reading. After his wife died, she became close to the seventy-one-year-old diplomat, marrying him in 1931 despite a thirty-four year age difference. When her husband died a few years later, she used her position to support several voluntary bodies. The WVS, as it soon became known, expanded rapidly. By 1942, it had enrolled one million members, making it the country's largest ever volunteer organisation. Members wore uniforms, but there were no ranks and relatively few rules.

As its initial name suggests, WVS concentrated at first on training people in blackout skills and responding to air raids. Even on Tiree, this threat was taken seriously, as this 1940 excerpt from the Cornaigmore School Log demonstrates: "Sergeant Maxwell, Tobermory, commences instruction of class of wardens, Special Constables and members of this staff in Air Raid Protection and procedure in the event of gas attack." But the WVS rapidly expanded into other welfare roles, setting up rest and first aid centres for those who had been made homeless by air raids, and looking after evacuated children. In 1944, the Cornaigmore School Log read: "Rubber boots would be supplied to the children deserving (under WVS scheme) if each of them got a certificate from the MOH [Medical Officer of Health] to back their application." Duncan Grant remembered being taken from Ruaig to the Church of Scotland manse in Gott for his Wellington boots; he pictured a gloomy room with a fire and two Persian cats with lots of pairs of shiny Wellington boots to try. There were other initiatives on Tiree to help the war effort; many of these are likely to have involved members of the Tiree WVS. From the Balemartine School log of 1940: "The girls in Primary 4 and 5 are knitting socks and scarves for the army and navy instead of their usual school knitting. Wool supplied by *An Comunn Gàidhealach*." And from the 1940 Cornaigmore School Log: "Concert and dance in aid of Sailors' Comforts Fund held in school."

There were also a number of shipwrecks, whose rescued sailors needed care: in 1940, the ninety rescued crew of HMS *Sturdy*; in 1942, forty crewmen from the *Laristan*, a tanker wrecked on Craignish; six crew of the Leith trawler *Ocean Tide*, rescued off Mannal; and the six Latvians brought ashore in Crossapol from the *Oceana* in 1949. In 1953, it was reported: "WVS in the little island of Coll clothed the survivors of the *Richard Crofts* in the storm offshore [this was a steam trawler that was wrecked in Cornaig Bay, Coll; four crew members managed to reach shore, but eight were lost]."

After the war, the WVS was clearly too useful to be disbanded, and it became a key part of civil defence, in particular preparing for nuclear attack during the Cold War. The WVS journal from 1953 has this extract: "'Exercise Thistle', the biggest exercise ever to take place in the United Kingdom, has just been concluded in the Kelvin Hall, Glasgow. The whole problem of atomic attack on Glasgow was considered by all the interested parties and Civil Defence Authorities in the Western Zone. Our responsibility was to feed the homeless and receive them in Rest Centres. Over 5,500 members of the Corps and others from Scotland were served with lunch, and a larger number with tea on Sunday, when the Exercise models and demonstrations were exhibited to the public. The Food Flying Squad from Falkirk was on view." The WVS circulated factsheets like this.

In 1966, the Queen gave the organisation the title 'Womens Royal Voluntary Service'; in 2013 it became the Royal Voluntary Service, focussing on caring for older people. 'Meals on Wheels' had been started locally in 1943 by the WVS in Welwyn Garden City following an influenza outbreak. The idea was rolled out across the country in 1945. By 1962, four million meals were being served in the UK, and the initiative spread to Australia, Canada and America. Recently, however, local authority cutbacks have squeezed the service, forcing those who cannot cook their own food into contracts with companies selling pre-packed microwave meals.

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