

Women, Sport and the People's War in Britain, 1939-45

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3 On the eve of war in 1939, an anonymous article appeared in *Women's Cricket* magazine. It
4 declared that:
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7 If the British Empire is to survive as the greatest barrier in the
8 world against despotism, she must be upheld by the trained
9 service of all her peoples... The team games player learns
10 discipline through games so that this comes naturally to her;
11 she will fall into the ways of an organized service all the more
12 easily.¹
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16 This view was one that took hold of the British government as the realities of total war hit
17 home. It was revolutionary as an ideology because, in a country where up to 1939 women's
18 sport had remained separate and marginalised, in a total war it now applied to women as
19 well as men. Sport also became an important element of wartime social citizenship.² To
20 'carry on' in spite of the obstacles and privations of war was transformed into a patriotic
21 act; and this too was equally important for women as it was for men. The Wimbledon Ladies
22 Hockey Club (LHC), for instance, described themselves as 'going into action as well as the
23 civilian and armed forces' and explicitly discussed the contribution it was making as an
24 institution to the war effort.³ Between 1939 and 1945, women became a key component of
25 the home front as industrial and civil defence workers as well as auxiliaries in the armed
26 services. Their morale, welfare and physical fitness mattered and were valued by the
27 government, the military and civil defence authorities and voluntary bodies such as the
28 Central Council for Physical Recreation (CCPR)⁴ that were to become vital in sustaining and
29 stimulating popular recreation during the conflict. But the impetus for an expansion in
30 women's sport also came from women themselves who, as we shall see, pushed for the
31 space and the opportunities to participate in sporting activity and extend the boundaries of
32 women's sport to a degree that had seemed impossible in the interwar years.
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41 Despite considerable progress over the past decade or so, female participation in sport
42 continues to be neglected by historians. Feminist historians have generally paid limited
43 attention to the role of sport in women's lives and it has figured little in some of the most
44 important twentieth-century surveys of women in Britain.⁵ While journals such as *Women's
45 History Review* have been increasingly open to the inclusion of articles on sport and leisure,
46 including a 'Women in Sport' forum in 2015,⁶ it remains true that women's sports history is
47 'an under-researched field' and a 'peculiarly neglected area of academic research in
48 Britain'.⁷ Much of the most important work in challenging Richard Holt's much-quoted
49 suggestion that women figured 'only fleetingly' in British sports history has focused on the
50 intersection between sport, leisure and physical culture.⁸ There has been a tendency to
51 emphasise that leisure opportunities were significantly structured and often constrained by
52 marriage, class and economic opportunities, although detailed studies of individual sports
53 have modified this view.⁹
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3 The extensive scholarship on women during the Second World War has been similarly silent
4 on sport and leisure. Penny Summerfield's ground-breaking work on women's wartime
5 experiences, for example, pays no attention to these themes.¹⁰ Sandra Trudgen Dawson's
6 article on recreational opportunities for women workers in government hostels is a rare
7 exception that acknowledges the significance allocated to leisure in official assessments of
8 employee morale, although there is little reference to the experiences of the women
9 themselves and the article paints a picture of limited opportunities.¹¹ The small amount of
10 scholarly work on sport during the war, meanwhile, has tended to focus almost exclusively
11 on men's sport and particularly on well-trodden debates around war, continuity and
12 change, highlighting questions of class rather than gender.¹² When women are mentioned,
13 as in Eilidh McCrae's study of female exercise between 1930 and 1970, the suggestion is
14 that the Second World War had little impact on the sporting lives of British women.¹³ This
15 article seeks to make a significant intervention in this literature, adding to what we know
16 about attitudes to women and sport during the war but also exploring what sport meant to
17 women at the time. Were those women who took part in sporting activity 'playing for their
18 country' or were they mainly playing for themselves? ~~Can we really say that for these
19 women, sport was emancipatory, or did they, to adapt Harold Smith's argument, find
20 wartime changes in the sporting arena undesirable?~~¹⁴

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29 This article utilises a large amount of unexplored material to examine a topic that has
30 hitherto been neglected by both feminist historians and sports historians. Media coverage
31 of women's sport, government records and documents produced by the military
32 authorities have been used, as have the abundant archives of Mass-Observation, both
33 reports written by observers and diaries and directive replies authored by volunteer
34 members of the organisation's National Panel.¹⁵ These reports are suggestive both directly
35 and in terms of their potential impact on government policy: a focus on female morale, for
36 example, would have been extremely useful to the wartime government. We have intended
37 in this article to garner material from a variety of viewpoints. Many of these sources, of
38 course, provide insight into the official rationale behind the promotion of female sport in
39 wartime. But they cannot speak for the women themselves. We have attempted to make
40 women's voices heard by using the vignettes some women included in their memoirs,
41 material in oral history collections and the accounts of female Mass-Observers. These
42 sources do not provide a comprehensive picture and cannot be seen as representative of
43 female opinion as a whole, particularly as most were authored by middle-class women. But
44 taken together they offer a new perspective on a neglected period of women's sports
45 history and new insights in relation to the four key themes that will be used to structure the
46 following pages: the fortunes of clubs; sport and work; sport in the services; and sport and
47 everyday life.

58 59 **Women, Sport and Clubs**

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3 The difficulties amateur and recreational sports clubs faced in continuing to operate were
4 manifold during the Second World War. Membership fell significantly as a result of
5 increased military service, war work, evacuation and the demands of voluntary and civil
6 defence work. Certainly the number of clubs affiliated to national and regional associations
7 declined during the war, although the general lack of reliable data makes it difficult to
8 identify patterns with great precision. We know, for instance, that the membership of the
9 Middlesex Women's Hockey Association dropped from 139 teams in the 1938-39 season to
10 43 during the first wartime season and a low point of eleven in 1940-41 as the Blitz,
11 evacuation and associated restrictions took hold. Membership had increased to 28 by 1942-
12 43 and reached 46 in 1944-45, the final wartime season, aided particularly by a rise in
13 membership among school teams.¹⁶ Nonetheless 'carrying on', in sport as in other spheres
14 of social activity, was widely interpreted in the context of public service and duty. By
15 continuing to function, and thus offering members the chance to play when possible, sports
16 clubs saw themselves as actively contributing to the war effort.¹⁷ This was as true in relation
17 to women's or mixed clubs as men's.

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25 Where men were forced to leave clubs women frequently stepped in, often assuming
26 leadership roles. Mass-Observation saw female enrolment as key to the survival of some of
27 the mixed cycling, swimming and rowing clubs it analysed in 1941. At one cycling club, the
28 secretary's position was simply taken over by his wife after his call up.¹⁸ Wives took on their
29 husband's duties in hunting too. At Heythorp Lady Ashton became Master of Foxhounds and
30 the same role was taken by Mrs Heber Percy (Cotswold), Mrs Frances Pitt (Wheatland) and
31 Mrs Arkwright (North Warwickshire).¹⁹ Female officials became more influential as well as
32 more numerous, helping to construct spaces where women's independence could flourish.
33 This was especially true of sports such as swimming. In Birmingham, Olwyn Jones was the
34 driving force behind the only surviving women's team swimming league in the country and a
35 key figure at her own club, Birmingham Central Ladies, and the Royal Life Saving Society.²⁰
36 The sisters Janet and Vivian Bassett-Lowke were instrumental in pioneering wartime water
37 shows of swimming and diving and establishing Northampton as 'the mecca of wartime
38 swimming'.²¹ By 1941, a number of the town's eight swimming clubs were being run by
39 female secretaries.²² Janet's broader influence over the sport was reinforced in her wartime
40 role as honorary editor of its foremost national publication, *The Swimming Times*, replacing
41 Captain Cummins in late 1939.²³ In February 1940, the *Birmingham Gazette* celebrated the
42 achievements of Ethel Gafney and Irene Plant, acting secretaries respectively of the Midland
43 Ladies Cycling Club and the Handsworth Cycling Club, in promoting women's cycling as 'an
44 example in war'.²⁴ In lawn tennis, similarly, the prestigious All-England club at Wimbledon
45 promoted Nora Cleather from assistant secretary to wartime secretary in November 1939
46 following the resignation of D. R. Larcombe after a long illness.²⁵ Participation and
47 leadership in sports clubs, whether women-only or mixed, was an important aspect of the
48 lives of middle-class women in wartime that has been left unexplored by historians.²⁶

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3 In some districts, the general picture of decline and withdrawal was resisted through the
4 formation of new women's sports clubs. A ladies' athletics club established in Walsall in May
5 1941 with six members could boast a membership of fifty by the time of the first annual
6 meeting four months later.²⁷ On a smaller scale, in Mill Hill, Middlesex, the seven founders
7 of a girls' badminton club based at a local secondary school in the summer of 1940 presided
8 over more than a doubling of membership within a couple of weeks, with the club still
9 flourishing a year later.²⁸ Attempts to establish women's clubs or sections during the war
10 were common, even if they were not always successful. In Nottingham, for instance, the
11 Broad Oak Road Cycling Club arranged a special ladies' invitational run in August 1940 to
12 attract 'women with bicycles who, now that their husbands or fiancés are away on military
13 service may be looking for a pastime'.²⁹ In the same city, rower Nellie Ball used the local
14 press to help her in organising and financing a ladies' rowing club which she felt was needed
15 due to the neglect of the sport by local youth organisations.³⁰ There are no follow-up
16 reports in either case to suggest these interventions were successful.

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24 There is plenty of evidence that women's clubs were significantly affected by the mobility of
25 members and increasing demands on the time of those who stayed. Of sixteen female
26 members of the Beccles Congregational Church Bowls Club in Suffolk in 1939, only two were
27 left in 1942.³¹ Evacuation was a chief cause of the loss of almost the entire female
28 membership of the aforementioned Uxbridge cycling club.³² The records of the Wimbledon
29 LHC indicate the fluctuating character of membership across the war years. While the
30 official playing membership stayed fairly constant at around thirty a year, the turnover from
31 season to season was large. One-hundred and twenty-five women in total were registered
32 with Wimbledon across the war years, many turning out only occasionally as 'non-playing'
33 or 'war' members. Of the seventy or so playing members, only two – Miss Marris and Mrs
34 Dodd – were registered for every wartime season.³³ War work, service training and changes
35 in employment took many pre-war members away from the area. Some, such as Dagmar
36 Clifton, who moved to Maidenhead and Bournemouth and was stationed with the WAAF in
37 Aberdeenshire, never returned to the club.³⁴ But others continued their association from
38 afar, with the intention of returning, as Hornabrook did in 1942 following a move to
39 Cambridgeshire at the start of the war, and Ivy Dodwell did in the 1944-45 season after
40 spells nursing in Scarborough and Bletchley, before moving on again to Manchester at the
41 end of the war.³⁵ Research on women's golf reveals that it was not unusual for some club
42 memberships to be drastically reduced. At Seaford Golf Club in Sussex the number of 'lady
43 members' dropped from 115 in 1939 to 74 in 1940 and then to 56 in 1941, remaining largely
44 unchanged for the rest of the war. A similar halving of membership was recorded at
45 Knebworth Golf Club, while at West Byfleet in Surrey the fall in female membership was
46 more severe, from 100 in 1939 to 30 by the end of the war.³⁶ As in other areas of women's
47 wartime life, patterns of activity in sports clubs were mixed and variable over time and
48 space.

Sport and War Work

Between 1939 and 1943, 1.5 million women took up work in 'essential' wartime industries.³⁷ The National Service (No. 2) Act of 1941 conscripted women for the first time in British history, specifically unmarried women aged between 20 and 30, who mainly ended up in the armed forces or essential industrial work. After mid-1942, this was extended to wives without children and older women. Naturally these levels of compulsion led the government to be particularly concerned about morale. Industrial welfare became a particular focus of the wartime Ministry of Labour with the appointment of Ernest Bevin in May 1940. As a prominent trade union leader, Bevin came to the role with moral arguments for improved conditions for war workers as well as strategic and practical ones. He soon put in place a series of welfare initiatives. On his orders, the factory inspectorate was moved from the Home Office to his new ministry. A July 1940 order compelled factories with a workforce of over 250 employees to hire a welfare officer, while local welfare officers were appointed directly by the Ministry to advise on welfare outside the factory.³⁸ By the end of 1941, no establishment could be scheduled by the government for war work unless the Ministry of Labour was satisfied with its welfare arrangements.³⁹ Much of this should also been seen in the context of the interwar growth of recreation and sport, for women as well as men, as part of the industrial relations policies of large employers.⁴⁰

Sport went on at a variety of levels within this welfare framework. Many factories opened up on-site facilities for workers to use and held workers' sports days. Hostels managed by the YWCA or the Ministry of Labour itself to house workers were opened during the war and provided with their own recreational equipment, including sports gear. One responsibility of local welfare officers was to contact local voluntary organisations (including, for example, hockey and netball associations and clubs) to arrange for workers to use their facilities. The Ministry also asked the National Association of Girls' Clubs to set up new clubs specifically for women workers. Fifty-seven new clubs had been created with 18,000 members by 1945; many of these clubs ran sports teams.⁴¹ Finally the CCPR was enlisted to assist with provision of physical recreation for adults engaged in work of national importance. The Council advised welfare officers, ran physical training classes and established camps where industrial workers could take holidays and focus on keeping healthy and active.⁴² In this context, sport was seen as a key aspect of workers' welfare. The government stressed that morale and productivity would be higher if women had the chance to take part in physical recreation, and reported in 1943 that 'the general health of women in industry appears not only maintained but to be improving'.⁴³

Departmental archives indicate that improved recreational facilities were regarded as a direct solution to complaints of boredom and low morale among female workers. In 1942, for example, the Ministry of Air Production paid for a hut to be converted into a social centre at a factory in Shaw, near Oldham. Described by the Ministry of Labour as 'a most god-forsaken place', with 'dreary' accommodation, Shaw was very unpopular among the

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3 transferred female workers from Blackpool, hordes of whom were reported to be 'packing
4 up and going home after a couple of weeks'. Factory managers considered the social centre
5 as having been vital in stemming labour turnover and 'maintaining a happy labour force' at
6 Shaw.⁴⁴ In May 1944, additional funding for a social club at a Royal Ordnance factory in
7 Newport was justified on the grounds that recreational amenities in the town were poor
8 and, with few alternatives, much of the female workforce was 'resort[ing] to the public
9 houses with demoralising results'.⁴⁵ Such evidence fits with Sandra Trudgen Dawson's claim
10 that the lack of recreational facilities at government hostels was a factor in many
11 conscripted women workers rejecting state accommodation.⁴⁶

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17 A Trades Union Congress (TUC) report from early 1944 highlighted the close connection
18 made between adequate recreation and increased productivity in the light of broader
19 wartime discussions concerning morality, citizenship and social responsibility. The report,
20 conducted by the TUC's Women's Advisory Committee (WAC), focused on recreational
21 facilities for young workers, particularly women transferred 'far from their homes'.⁴⁷ This
22 was linked to an alleged increase in the number of young women visiting public houses, a
23 tendency identified by historian Sonya Rose as one facet of a larger narrative of immoral
24 and irresponsible 'good time girls' that was frequently contrasted with the 'self-restraint,
25 moral fortitude and cheerful altruism' believed to characterise the British at war.⁴⁸ The
26 report's findings were inconclusive, identifying shortages of facilities in some areas but
27 successful provision elsewhere.⁴⁹ The most striking characteristic of the responses from
28 Trades Councils that informed the report, however, were the assumed distinctions in the
29 recreational needs of female and male workers. Leisure for women was defined as distinct
30 from men's, and thus different from the norm. Because it was not straightforward, it was
31 felt to require particular and targeted solutions. In Aldershot, for instance, no problems in
32 recreational provision were identified as most of the small number of imported workers had
33 been men, who it was thought could easily find recreations 'corresponding with those in
34 their home districts', such as football, going to the pub or the cinema, or listening to the
35 wireless. Women's leisure, it was implied, had by contrast specifically to be catered for,
36 through the creation of a YWCA hostel or a new social club.⁵⁰ Similarly, a representative of
37 the Standing Committee of Women's Organisations wrote to the TUC outlining how a
38 scheme to open British Restaurants in Bath had had no difficulty in attracting young men,
39 with a canteen, amplified music and the occasional boxing display. Appealing to 'girls' was
40 more problematic, however, as it was found that few were interested in anything other than
41 dancing.⁵¹ Elsewhere, the perceived narrowness of female recreational interests was
42 interpreted in terms of apathy and an unwillingness to adapt to new circumstances. The
43 small number of transferred female trainees in Bradford had reportedly not wanted any
44 recreational facilities at all, instead asking to be billeted closer to their work. As a result,
45 female attendance at the city's youth clubs, social centres and the Evening Institute's
46 Physical Training and Keep-Fit classes had all been very poor.⁵²

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3 These observations chime with the evidence in Mass-Observation's 1943 publication *War*
4 *Factory*, a study by the Oxford graduate Celia Fremlin of her time working in a small
5 munitions factory just outside Malmesbury in Gloucestershire. In the section of the book
6 devoted to 'leisure', Fremlin described the popularity of 'ready-made amusements' such as
7 the cinema and the failure of official initiatives, like the factory-sponsored social centre, to
8 overcome the 'aloof and disinterested attitude' of the majority of transferred workers. A
9 sense of the workers' lack of enthusiasm for new pursuits, or for engaging with new social
10 units or friendship groups, pervaded this section of the book. Fremlin bemoaned her
11 colleagues' lack of interest in 'dramatic groups, cycling or walking clubs, and so on', and the
12 'lack of initiative they display in their own leisure'.⁵³

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18 Evidence from CCPR reports, however, suggests not only that women's recreation and sport
19 were more popular and widespread but that they were often at the heart of the wartime
20 provision of work-based physical activity. In many cases, factory-based classes provided the
21 stimulus for the foundation of sports teams and clubs. At Miles Aircraft in Reading, for
22 example, the worktime keep-fit classes soon extended into thriving netball competitions,
23 with eighteen teams, as well as swimming and cycling groups. In Wolverhampton, a works'
24 netball league developed from the popularity of voluntary physical recreation classes at ten
25 local factories.⁵⁴ In certain cities, the organisation of works' sport became a key objective of
26 welfare officers and CCPR officials and competition flourished. In Coventry, where one CCPR
27 representative devoted her whole time to industry, netball coaching for workers at five
28 factories and four hostels led to the creation of a city-wide league. By the summer of 1944,
29 there were 34 factory netball teams in Coventry; at Standard's Aero No. 1 factory, a
30 successful championship victory led to the development of regular inter-departmental
31 competition between twenty teams.⁵⁵

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38 The focus on the welfare of female workers meant that women's sport was often prioritised
39 by welfare officers and CCPR representatives. Netball, in particular, was by some distance
40 the fastest growing participatory sport. The CCPR was training more national leaders in
41 netball during the war than in any other sport: 45 in fifteen months until June 1943, for
42 instance, compared with 36 in soccer, eight in athletics, seven in rugby and just one in
43 cricket.⁵⁶ Alongside the large works' leagues in Coventry and Wolverhampton, regular
44 netball competitions among women workers were also introduced in Cambridge, Leeds,
45 Lincoln, Nottingham, Portsmouth, Worksop, Worcester and Tyneside. Games weeks and
46 sports rallies stimulated interest, as at the Royal Ordnance factory in Aycliffe, County
47 Durham, where interest in the sport 'greatly increased' after a factory 'fitness week' and 27
48 teams were soon formed into departmental leagues.⁵⁷ Comparable developments on a
49 smaller scale can be traced in relation to women's hockey, rounders and even soccer, a
50 sport still officially regarded as inappropriate for women by the British football associations.
51 Nonetheless, soccer tournaments for female workers were organised in Woking in 1941 and
52 Erith, Kent, in 1943.⁵⁸ Elsewhere, charity matches were arranged between women workers
53 at engineering firms in Beverley and Hull, steelworks in Northamptonshire, aircraft factories
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3 in Manchester and transport companies in Hampshire.⁵⁹ Such examples correspond with the
4 reports of the wartime CCPR Sports and Games Sub-Committee, which taken as a whole
5 suggest that industrial welfare leaders were more active in relation to women's sport than
6 men's. This in turn concurs with the focus in official records on the need to manage and
7 control women's recreation to a degree that was not considered necessary for men.
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11 By 1944, 90 per cent of munitions factories had a definite form of welfare supervision.⁶⁰ The
12 Chief Inspector of Factories attributed these new measures to the increase in female
13 munitions workers. He wrote in his 1944 Annual Report that '[l]argely due to the influx of
14 women into industry, a new standard in regard to the conditions of employment has come
15 into existence.'⁶¹ A 1941 article in *Woman Engineer* also acknowledged that the opening of
16 'a Social and Sports section' in factories was particularly crucial if women were employed
17 there. 'The satisfactory training of women can best be accomplished after a physiological
18 and psychological investigation of their mind and body reaction', argued the author.⁶² These
19 new attitudes, shaped by the pressures of wartime production, transformed the lives of
20 women workers, the vast majority of whom were working class, by offering their social
21 group unprecedented opportunities to participate in sport.
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30 **Sport in the Services**

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32 As in industry, fitness for service in the armed forces and civil defence was considered
33 important and was closely monitored. In the military, concerns over morale increased after
34 the disaster of Dunkirk. In 1940 new Directorates of Welfare were established in all three
35 service branches. The intention was to train 'the whole needs of the man – the needs of his
36 mind, his body and his spirit...to aim at a high standard of physical, mental and moral well-
37 being which together will result in a contented soldier and so in a contented Army'.⁶³
38 Welfare officers were attached to each army command and each air and naval base, and
39 voluntary organisations were drafted in to aid the local organisation of entertainment and
40 recreation. Sport became an entrenched feature of military life in the war years, played out
41 at unit level between army officers and men and on public display at large-scale charity
42 matches.
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48 The key question for our purposes is how far sport, and its presumed morale and welfare
49 benefits, equally penetrated the women's services. Certainly, there is evidence that
50 commitment to recreation existed at the very top of the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS),
51 the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) and the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS).
52 Helen Gwynne-Vaughan, former head of the WAAF and in 1942 chief controller of the ATS,
53 wrote that:
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57 Good discipline, and comradeship...demand the maintenance
58 of a braced condition of mind and body in women as well as in
59 men...On the physical side plenty of exercise is needed, plenty
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3 of fresh air...internal as well as external cleanliness. These
4 things make for health and self-respect. They make therefore
5 for good behaviour and self-control.⁶⁴
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8 This view was endorsed in the 1942 Markham Committee Report on welfare conditions in
9 the women's services. The Report recognised that 'proper use of leisure time' was essential
10 to the welfare of recruits,⁶⁵ and welcomed the War Office's moves to set up a welfare
11 organisation to cover the three services based on the existing network of commands. The
12 Committee reported that officers had been appointed at each Command, assisted by
13 voluntary workers in the Command's localities; in some areas welfare officers liaised with
14 civilian authorities to secure equipment for sports and games and arrange for the loan of
15 local sports grounds. In addition, Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes (NAAFI) existed in all
16 camps and barracks of a substantial size to provide recreational facilities. Funding, as in the
17 men's services, came from War Office grants as well as Comforts Funds, from which a small
18 proportion was set aside to spend on sports equipment.⁶⁶
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24 By 1942, then, the basic training and day-to-day lives of women in the ATS, WRNS and
25 WAAF involved compulsory physical training (PT), including the playing of team games.
26 Leslie Whateley, Chief Controller of the ATS from 1943, reported that it had issued an order
27 to make PT compulsory after it became clear that auxiliaries resented having to take part in
28 their off-duty time.⁶⁷ In addition, once the ATS was given full military status in 1941, its
29 officers were trained in Officer Cadet Training Units (OCTU) which included PT in the
30 syllabus.⁶⁸ The games most commonly played were hockey, netball, tennis and cricket;
31 where pools were available, swimming was also popular. The Markham Committee found
32 that '[f]acilities for recreation and exercise are in general adequate or more than adequate
33 on the large stations',⁶⁹ and were impressed by 'the marked improvement in physique,
34 poise and self-confidence which is effected even by the first month's training'.⁷⁰
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41 Concern over the limited opportunities for active recreation among those in sedentary
42 duties led to an increasing focus on encouraging participation beyond compulsory PT. In
43 1943, all three services became members of the All-England Women's Hockey Association
44 (AEWHA) and the Women's Cricket Association (WCA), which allowed them to take
45 advantage of local association structures. From this point on, inter-service rallies and
46 matches were organised, Command fixtures were regularly played and women's sports
47 associations provided teams for representative service teams to compete against.⁷¹ Some of
48 these matches were large-scale charity games, as reported in the *QMAAC and ATS Old*
49 *Comrades' Association Gazette*. Inter-service matches could attract large crowds: the
50 *Gazette* reported in 1945 that in the final game of an inter-service Netball Rally 'the
51 cheering from the spectators became so loud that the players were unable to hear the
52 whistle'.⁷²
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58 Mixed sport was also common where men and women were stationed together. Gerard
59 DeGroot has argued that in mixed batteries during the war women lived separately, trained
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3 separately and undertook different duties. In short, they 'were restricted to an identifiably
4 female enclave within a strictly male environment'.⁷³ But this was not the case if recruits of
5 both sexes were involved in sport together. Several observers noted this phenomenon
6 during visits to military bases (though they did not comment on its significance). Peggy Scott
7 recorded that a group of airmen were teaching WAAFs cricket and one WAAF even played
8 for the men's team.⁷⁴ D. Collett Wadge included the following example as part of an account
9 of a day in the life of a woman serving in a mixed battery:

14 To-day we have challenged the officers, male and female, to a
15 hockey match. We will wipe the ground with them, we
16 promise ourselves. Unfortunately, they wipe the ground with
17 us, chiefly owing to the fact that one of the lieutenants turns
18 out to be an international.⁷⁵

21 In early 1944, it was reported that a mixed hockey team representing the Royal Naval
22 School of Photography were regularly competing against local clubs in West Sussex, having
23 'met with an enthusiastic response' and overcome 'the Navy's conservatism'.⁷⁶ *Women's*
24 *Cricket* reported after the war that some of the more talented players were selected to play
25 in the predominantly male Officers v. Sergeants cricket matches.⁷⁷ These accounts are
26 particularly intriguing because mixed team sport had generally been frowned upon before
27 the war. Marjorie Pollard, one of the founders of the WCA, described mixed cricket as 'a
28 waste of time' and argued that it was important that women were not seen to be trying to
29 'play like men'.⁷⁸

35 Differentiation between male and female recruits, however, remained in place. Whateley,
36 who resigned as Chief Controller in 1946, wrote in her memoirs that the problem of physical
37 training in the ATS 'remained unresolved up to the day I retired'.⁷⁹ She focused on two key
38 problems, both of which were the result of negative male attitudes to female physical
39 activity. The first was the struggle to convince commanding officers that physical recreation
40 was necessary for female auxiliaries. Though ultimately successful policies did change, this
41 often fight had a permanent little significant impact in practice:

46 Many of the ATS officers were so worn out with battling for
47 this ruling they no longer showed any interest one way or
48 another. The poor PT inspector at the War Office had the most
49 soul-destroying job of going round the units, where she was
50 either greeted by angry males or completely apathetic ATS
51 officers, none of whom gave her any encouragement
52 whatsoever.⁸⁰

56 Secondly, the Treasury refused to provide money for PT kit for female auxiliaries. 'Our
57 argument', Whateley recalled

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3 was that it was neither practical nor hygienic for women to do
4 physical jerks and such like in their narrow skirts and none-
5 too-loose shirts and then, after getting overheated, to return
6 to their duties in the same clothes – garments which, to put it
7 politely, needed airing.⁸¹
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11 Presumably the Treasury could not accept that women would be participating in rigorous
12 activities. The Markham Committee reported that some women were doing PT in their
13 underwear⁸² and, though a free issue of kit to all servicewomen was recommended, the
14 problem was not resolved. A 1942 WAAF report complained that the only WAAFs to possess
15 PT kit were the instructors, and Whateley noted that many girls continued to utilise their
16 own, civilian, clothing during PT.⁸³
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20 The experience of sport and physical recreation among female civil defence workers was
21 similarly varied. The Phoney War period had revealed ‘a large amount of unsettlement’ in
22 the services due to lack of action.⁸⁴ Government-sponsored schemes such as ‘Fitness for
23 Service’, introduced in the early summer of 1940, were devised to keep workers (including
24 those in civil defence) fit and occupied but initially women were not included in the plans.⁸⁵
25 As secretary of the CCPR, Phyllis Colson ignored the official line, arranging in December
26 1939 for London CCPR representatives to hold physical training classes for female Air Raid
27 Precautions (ARP) personnel.⁸⁶ But early reports on the physical training of civil defence
28 workers had little to say about women, treating them as an entirely separate category.
29 According to an April 1940 inquiry into ‘non-duty’ conditions in London, women were ‘fewer
30 in numbers, grouped in smaller units, working different hours of duty, and have different
31 interests’. The report went on to challenge the view ascribed to some commandants that
32 recreational facilities were not needed for women ‘as long as knitting is possible at times
33 when there are no duties’, although the alternative activities suggested – aside from table
34 tennis – also conformed to gender stereotypes.⁸⁷ A report from December 1941 suggested
35 that there had been little improvement. ‘[F]ar less provision’, it was felt, was being made for
36 female workers and as a result many felt ‘that their needs have been overlooked’.⁸⁸ A
37 pamphlet entitled *Physical Recreation for Civil Defence Workers* had given reasonable
38 (though not equal) space to sports designated appropriate ‘for women’, such as netball,
39 rounders and stoolball, as well as a range of games (including badminton, hockey and
40 softball) considered suitable to either sex.⁸⁹
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50 The gradual acceptance of the importance of physical fitness for both male and female civil
51 defence workers led the government to establish the Civil Defence Sports Committee in
52 1941. Regional sports advisors were appointed and specific training arranged for physical
53 training instructors. From 1943, the CCPR undertook fitness training for firewomen; Vera
54 Douie reported in 1949 that ‘Squad Drill, Fitness training and games played an important
55 part in all the training courses for firewomen, as well as in the normal daily routine’.⁹⁰
56 Progress reports from the Civil Defence Sports Committee suggested an encouraging
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3 extension of recreative physical activities among all personnel, including women. In some
4 areas female workers formed netball, tennis and cricket teams and played regularly.⁹¹ In
5 1943, London's recreational training committee appointed a netball representative,
6 affiliated to the South Eastern Counties Netball Association, arranged demonstration games
7 between county teams to 'stimulate enthusiasm', and held its own regional netball
8 tournament.⁹² For all this, progress was uneven and many sports advisors remained critical
9 of the lack of imagination shown at depot level, where boxing, cricket and football
10 continued to be the favoured sports despite being less suitable to confined spaces and less
11 'popular and valuable' among the range of personnel, including women and older men,
12 which comprised the wartime civil defence services.⁹³
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21 **Women, Sport and Everyday Life**

22 Research on leisure in wartime Britain has outlined a varied picture determined by time,
23 geography, gender, individual interests and so on.⁹⁴ Most of these factors were also
24 significant in peacetime but the war gave rise to additional considerations that generated
25 public discussion and could weigh heavily on the consciences of individuals. War changed
26 and complicated the relationship between work and non-work time. Many people worked
27 longer hours than before the war as well as committing to civil defence or voluntary
28 responsibilities. Some in the forces stationed at home or in civil defence posts, as we have
29 seen, had sporting activity built into their weekly schedule, though this was generally
30 considered training and not leisure. Relaxation and recreation away from paid work and war
31 duties was officially endorsed by the government and widely encouraged in the press but
32 not everyone agreed that it was beneficial to individuals or the nation as a whole. Activities
33 that were too conspicuous or seemed to damage the war effort in other ways could be
34 labelled unpatriotic. For women, notions of 'leisure', 'recreation' and 'spare time' were
35 inherently ambiguous. Claire Langhamer has shown that personal leisure time, however
36 defined, generally amounted to 'a snatched experience; something "fitted in" to everyday
37 life'.⁹⁵ With large numbers of women involved in war work, paid and unpaid, combined with
38 domestic responsibilities, many of which, like cooking and shopping, were more arduous
39 than ever, the notion of time away, to relax, to recuperate, or to indulge in hobbies,
40 including sport, was particularly problematic.
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50 Nevertheless replies to Mass-Observation directives offer a revealing insight into the
51 significance of sport in women's lives. Alongside a question which asked for views on the
52 continuation of organised sporting events, the March 1942 directive included a second
53 question encouraging respondents to think about the effect of the war on their 'own
54 attitude to sport' and whether this had made any difference to the amount of time they
55 spent on it.⁹⁶ Aside from using it to determine how interested respondents were in sport,
56 Mass-Observation ignored this second question completely in its subsequent report.⁹⁷ Yet
57 the replies constitute rare evidence of the war's impact on individual sports activity and
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3 how people felt about this. Not surprisingly, the majority of respondents were spending less
4 time on sport than before the war. By extrapolating from the responses, we can calculate
5 that a total of 154 (62.3 per cent) of those who answered the question clearly indicated that
6 less of their time was consumed by sport than prior to September 1939, with just 14 (5.7
7 per cent) spending more time on it and 79 (32.0 per cent) the same amount of time.
8 Interestingly among the female respondents, while only three said they had more time to
9 spend on sport, those who believed there was little difference was higher than the overall
10 total (38.1 per cent) and those who felt they spent less time on sport was slightly lower
11 (58.3 per cent).⁹⁸

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17 The directive replies and diaries show how stage in the life cycle and material considerations
18 operated alongside particular wartime circumstances in determining access to sport. A
19 number of women saw time as the chief restraint of potential activity, due to new work
20 commitments and longer hours as well as expanding responsibilities at home. A recently
21 married housewife who had spent pre-war weekends swimming and walking in the
22 countryside told Mass-Observation she now had no time or energy to do either. Instead, she
23 spent Saturday afternoons shopping and Sundays cooking and mending clothes in
24 preparation for the following week.⁹⁹ Married women particularly made reference to
25 increased domestic work and shopping difficulties, though a number, such as the bookshop
26 assistant and housewife from Edinburgh, who had long replaced sport with gardening and
27 walking, identified marriage as the turning-point rather than war.¹⁰⁰ More generally, it was
28 not uncommon for older women, particularly if married, to disassociate themselves from
29 sport and consider it inappropriate to their age and circumstance. 'I am a woman of 55',
30 wrote a Coventry housewife in response to the question about personal sporting activities,
31 'and hardly therefore in a position to say anything'.¹⁰¹ In response to a 1941 Mass-
32 Observation questionnaire, a woman in her thirties noted that she paid little attention to
33 sport but her 'man and son' were keen and a 50-year-old said she had 'lost all interest I ever
34 had' when her son was called up at the beginning of the war.¹⁰² A 35-year-old interviewee
35 was recorded as remarking pointedly that '[s]port's alright for youngsters – not me'.¹⁰³
36 Other female respondents simply connected the end of their participation in sport with the
37 end of schooling.¹⁰⁴

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47 That said, the distinction between the experiences of younger women on the one hand and
48 wives and mothers on the other was not as clear-cut as might be assumed. Among those
49 who wrote positively about opportunities to engage in wartime sport were a handful of
50 married women who seemed relatively untroubled by social expectations. To take just two
51 examples, a science teacher and housewife from Preston, married in 1941, found her
52 chosen sports of tennis and swimming still available; only golf had become a 'luxury' that
53 was 'now beyond my financial situation'.¹⁰⁵ From south-west London a married woman in
54 her twenties was adamant that

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3 we should get just as much pleasure out of life as we can at
4 any time and even more so now when we don't know what
5 the future will be like. I have carried on as far as possible in the
6 way of my pleasures just the same as before the war – even
7 when the blitz was on I went skating, dancing etc. just as much
8 as at any other time.
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12 Only reduced facilities and limited money, she concluded, had restricted her sporting
13 activity.¹⁰⁶
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16 A common theme in the responses of female panellists was the linking of sporting
17 participation with family and friendship groups. Increased mobility, in particular through
18 war service and munitions work, ~~in particular~~ broke up many of the formal clubs and
19 informal social networks that we know framed a great deal of female sporting activity.¹⁰⁷
20 This impacted significantly on how women thought about sport. A nurse who before the war
21 had swum and played tennis in the summer, and played lacrosse once a week in the winter,
22 found fewer opportunities and facilities when she moved during the war to Banbury.¹⁰⁸ A
23 housewife who had moved from London to Witham in Essex considered this the main
24 reason for her reduced activity. Although keen on tennis and table tennis, she had not
25 played much during the war but believed she would have continued to go regularly 'if I were
26 still in London'.¹⁰⁹ A similar longing for the social interaction sport provided was expressed
27 by a teacher who had moved from south London to Devon. Although she could still cycle,
28 there was no outlet for her pre-war interests in ice-skating and pony racing and so she
29 intended to join a local tennis club during the summer primarily 'for the social side'.¹¹⁰ The
30 movement away of club members and playing partners also limited the prospects for
31 sociability through sport, though this was an equally common response for men as for
32 women.¹¹¹ A 20-year old from Oxford complained that many of the members of both her
33 cycling and tennis clubs had now joined up.¹¹² A trainee welfare supervisor from Welwyn
34 Garden City put her reduced participation in tennis down to the difficulty of getting partners
35 due to long hours and occupational mobility.¹¹³
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45 A number of women reflected upon the way in which their lifetime engagement with sport
46 had been channelled through wider friendship and family networks. A young elementary
47 school teacher recalled her attitude to organised games at school:
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50 Practising was a horror endured because all my friends were
51 good players and I hated admitting in those days that they
52 could do anything better than I could. Illness prevented
53 playing in my last year and after a year's freedom I detested
54 games – *very compulsory ones* – in college.¹¹⁴
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58 For others, sport was experienced only 'at the instigation and expense' of male companions.
59 One married women from Glasgow thought the war had made no difference to her
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3 involvement in sport. She had only ever attended events, never participating. 'I don't mind if
4 I never go to any more', she concluded, 'but if I do it will be as a cheerful and intelligently
5 responsive companion to a man who has keener interests than I have'.¹¹⁵ Another Mass-
6 Observer who was not a great participant or spectator as her 'inclinations' ran 'more to the
7 arts' nonetheless admitted to periodic crazes 'on various kinds of sport'. She felt that the
8 war had 'stimulated' her interest but that there was no adequate outlet, given that ice-
9 skating was impossible where she had been evacuated to and that her burgeoning interest
10 in all-in wrestling with a male friend had been stopped by her mother, who deemed it 'not a
11 place where a young lady should be seen'.¹¹⁶ For those women more accustomed to shared
12 leisure experiences, war could be both hindrance and liberation. Two young housewives,
13 from Bournemouth and Sheffield respectively, explained that they now partook in less sport
14 and outdoor leisure because of their husbands' unavailability.¹¹⁷ But a restaurant owner
15 from Edinburgh was 'relieved' that the war had ended sailing excursions with her husband
16 that she did not enjoy. Similarly, for a researcher from Sheffield, who 'for social reasons'
17 occasionally played tennis in peacetime, 'the war has made me a good excuse to get out of
18 this'.¹¹⁸

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Personal narratives demonstrate that for women as for men sport sometimes became part
of the routine of social life during wartime. For May Smith, 24 years old when war began
and a school teacher who lived with her parents in the Derbyshire village of Swadlincote,
tennis constituted the core of her daily social interaction between May and August
throughout most of the conflict. She played at the club at which she was a member, and
occasionally at the park, most evenings subject to weather and air raids. She played and
socialised with female and male friends and acquaintances, and the tennis club became the
site of developing relationships as well as a source of gossip, rumour and political
discussion.¹¹⁹ Sarcastically summarising her 'wildly exciting life' in a diary entry in May 1940,
Smith noted that it consisted of '[s]chool, tennis, school, flicks, and school again, with a dash
of Freddie [her occasional doubles partner and future husband] to relieve the femininity of
my companions'.¹²⁰ For Mary Buchanan, serving in the ATS in London, visits to dog racing at
White City and racing at Windsor with her father were regular features of life through most
of 1943 and 1944. She also reported playing 'quite a bit of tennis' with friends and family.¹²¹
Organising sports practices, athletics events and netball rallies was a regular part of life for a
school teacher based in Thornaby-on-Tees but so too was playing table tennis with friends
and attending professional soccer matches in nearby Middlesbrough.¹²² These and other
diaries reported sport as a familiar and repetitive activity. It was precisely the ordinary
routine of sporting activity that participants seemed to value most and which helped to
weave it so tightly into the fabric of everyday wartime life.

Conclusion

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3 Both historians of women and historians of sport have highlighted the lack of permanent
4 change the war caused in people's lives. Hill writes that: 'If 1945 represented any kind of
5 revolution in British society, there were certainly no signs of one in the field of leisure and
6 recreation.'¹²³ What of the situation for women's sport? Some wartime changes were
7 certainly transient. For example, mixed sport - such as that found at anti-aircraft batteries -
8 did not survive the war in any form; women continued to pursue the sports separatism of
9 the interwar years, while the FA were so threatened by female incursions into their sport
10 that in 1946 they moved to reaffirm their ban on women's football. However, it is
11 interesting to note that despite the upheaval of war, most associations witnessed
12 unprecedented growth in membership over the decade following 1945. In 1949, Pollard
13 reported in *Hockey Field* that 'there are more [readers] now than ever before in the history
14 of this magazine'.¹²⁴ By 1955, both the WCA and the AEWHA reported that they had
15 exceeded pre-war affiliation figures.¹²⁵ But the most significant growth was in sports
16 favoured by working-class women: 160,000 women playing netball in 1939 became 3 million
17 by 1951.¹²⁶ It seems likely that some of this increase came about partly because more
18 working-class women were exposed to sport during wartime, through their work in
19 factories, in the armed forces, or in civil defence. Sport also became a permanent part of the
20 Women's Auxiliary Services after the war, as is clear from the *QMAAC and ATS Gazette*,
21 which featured a regular 'sport' section after 1946.¹²⁷

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31 It is tempting to conclude from our twenty-first century perspective that these increasing
32 opportunities to participate in sport would have improved the lives of women, but the
33 responses to some Mass-Observation directives outlined here indicate that sport was not
34 altogether viewed in a positive light. For some women in the auxiliary services, too, sport
35 was remembered as an extremely negative part of their wartime experience: 'I didn't join
36 up to play bloody rounders', was one verdict.¹²⁸ Another woman, a former PT Instructor in
37 the ATS, recalled that:

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Few of the girls took kindly to PT at first...I had to get them up
at six in the morning for PT, and that was not at all popular.
One day I came back to my room and found that all my clothes
had been burnt. They found out who had done it, and we
never saw her again.¹²⁹

To these women, sport was simply an extra patriotic duty to perform, one that could be
abandoned with relief once the war ended.

Others, though, were determined to continue. One WAAF wrote in 1944:

My aim is a return to a sane and sweet normality in an England
at peace. I want to marry...But all work and no play makes a

dull wife and a tired mother, so I shall continue to play. I shall cycle and hike, dance and skate with my husband, and later teach the children.¹³⁰

Intriguingly, this suggests an erosion of the idea that married women with children should sacrifice their leisure time in favour of servicing their families. Perhaps the official government promotion of sport for all women during wartime, due to its perceived importance for female morale, had left its mark? Future research might usefully consider this question.

ENDNOTES

¹ *Women's Cricket*, May 1939, 14.

² On citizenship during the Second World War, see David Morgan and Mary Evans, *The Battle for Britain: Citizenship and Ideology in the Second World War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1993); Sonya O. Rose, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain, 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

³ Minutes of Wimbledon Ladies' Hockey Club (WLHC) Committee, 18 November 1939, WLHC Collection, National Hockey Museum (NHM).

⁴ The Central Council of Recreative Physical Training before 1944.

⁵ See, for example, Jane Lewis, *Women in Britain since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); Sue Bruley, *Women in Britain since 1900* (London: Macmillan, 1999); Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1914-1999* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

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¹³ McCrae, *Exercise in the Female Life-Cycle*, 10-11. The exception is Raffaella Nicholson, 'Playing for their country? Women's Sport in Second World War Britain', Unpublished MSt Thesis, University of Oxford, 2010, on which parts of this article are based.

¹⁴ Harold Smith (ed.), *War and Social Change: British Society in the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 209.

¹⁵ [Mass-Observation's National Panel consisted of volunteers recruited to respond to monthly 'directive' questions and other tasks. Many also wrote diaries for Mass-Observation. For a detailed history of](#) Mass-Observation, see James Hinton, *The Mass Observers: A History, 1937-1949* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁶ Minutes of Middlesex Women's Hockey Association (MWH) AGM, 17 April 1942; Minutes of MWH Committee Meeting, 13 April 1943; Minutes of MWH Executive Committee Meeting, 15 September 1945, MWH Archives, NHM.

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¹⁹ Caroline Seebohn, *The Country House: A Wartime History, 1939-45* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1989), 40.

²⁰ *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 5 November 1940, 12 March, 19 August 1941; *The Swimming Times*, October 1940, December 1940.

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²⁴ *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 22 February 1940.

²⁵ *Lawn Tennis and Badminton*, 11 November 1939.

²⁶ There is almost no mention of sports organisations in James Hinton, *Women, Social Leadership and the Second World War: Continuities of Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

²⁷ *Walsall Observer and South Staffordshire Chronicle*, 13 September 1941.

²⁸ Report on 'Girls' Badminton Club in Mill Hill', 3 June 1941, TC 82/1/C, M-O A.

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³⁶ Luke J. Harris, 'Women's Role in Golf during World War Two', *Through the Green* (September 2009), 16-21.

³⁷ Penny Summerfield, *Women Workers in the Second World War: Production and Patriarchy in Conflict* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), 29.

³⁸ Alan Bullock, *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin: Volume 2 – Minister of Labour, 1940-1945* (London: Heinemann, 1967), 78-79, 81.

³⁹ Vera Douie, *Daughters of Britain: An Account of the Work of British Women during the Second World War* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1949), 105.

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