

# W.R.N.S.

**Reorganisation of the British Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS)** on the eve of World War II. The decision to reorganise the British WRNS, which had been disbanded after World War I, was made on November 22, 1938. Dame Katherine Furse, who had overseen the formation and direction of the WRNS in World War I, declined to accept the directorship. She deferred to youth, Mrs. Vera Laughton Matthews was offered the post at the end of March 1939. Her deputy was E. M. (Angela) Goodenough, at that time the chief woman official at the admiralty.

Recruits were required to be British citizens with British-born parents. The age limits at first were from eighteen to forty-five but were later expanded to seventeen and a half to fifty. The first tasks allotted to the women were office work, motor transport, cooking, and general duties. Volunteers were accepted, trained, and put in uniform and service with the outbreak of the war.

## Mathews, Vera Laughton

Served in WRNS (1917–19) and was recalled as its director on the eve of World War II;

Created a Commander of the British Empire (CBE, 1942).

Created a Dame of the British Empire (DBE, 1945);

Retired from WRNS (1946).



Very quickly the women were absorbed into a wide variety of roles which were more diverse than those on offer during the First World War, some of them highly secret, and many more of them served outside Britain.

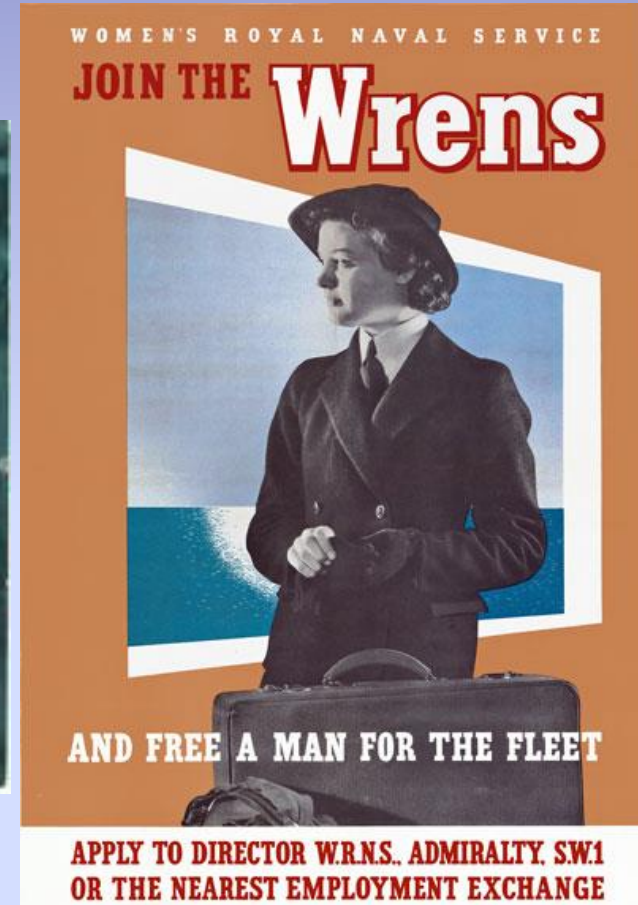
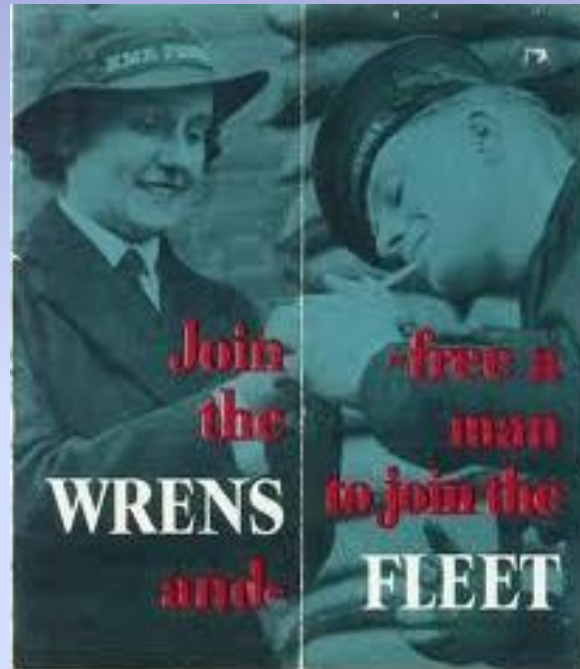
There was also a group of Special Duties [Linguists] Wrens, often with language degrees, who were drafted to Stations around the coast, intercepting signals.

The pressure on naval manpower became more acute during the Second World War consequently the WRNS expanded quickly to meet the need, reaching a peak of almost 75,000 Wrens in September 1944.

When the War ended, those who wished to, were demobilised.

A Permanent Service was set up, providing a career for women alongside the men of the Royal Navy.

## World War II Recruiting Posters





Wrens wore the same rank insignia as their male equivalents, but in blue instead of gold. The "curls" atop officers' rank stripes were diamond-shaped instead of circular.

From 1939, Wren uniform consisted of a double-breasted jacket and skirt, with shirt and tie, for all ranks (although similar working dress to the men could also be worn).

Junior Ratings wore hats similar to those of their male counterparts (although with a more sloping top).

Senior Ratings (Petty Officers and above) and officers wore tricorn hats with a white cover.

All insignia, including cap badges and non-substantive (trade) badges, were blue.





The Admiralty and Royal Navy used the Wrens as dispatch riders. Initially, only women with previous motorcycle riding experience were selected, so some of the first dispatch riders were well known competition riders from local race circuits.

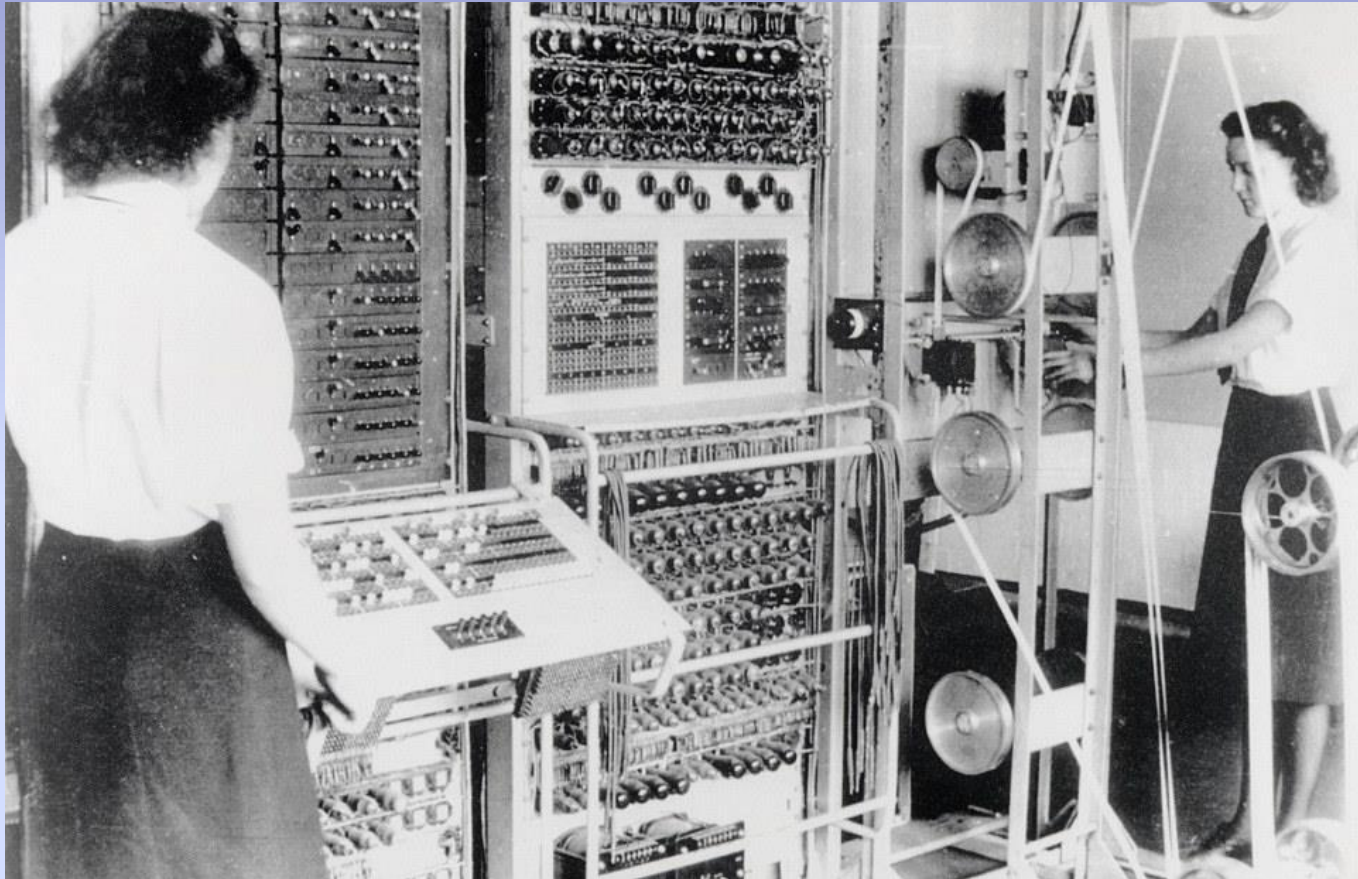


Women's Royal Naval Service signaller  
with signal flags, 1940.



WRNS based at the enormous British naval base at Portsmouth move a torpedo towards a loading bay used by one of the Navy's U-class submarines.





Top secret: Women work on the Colossus computer at Bletchley Park in Buckinghamshire, which was used to help crack the German Lazlo and enigma codes.

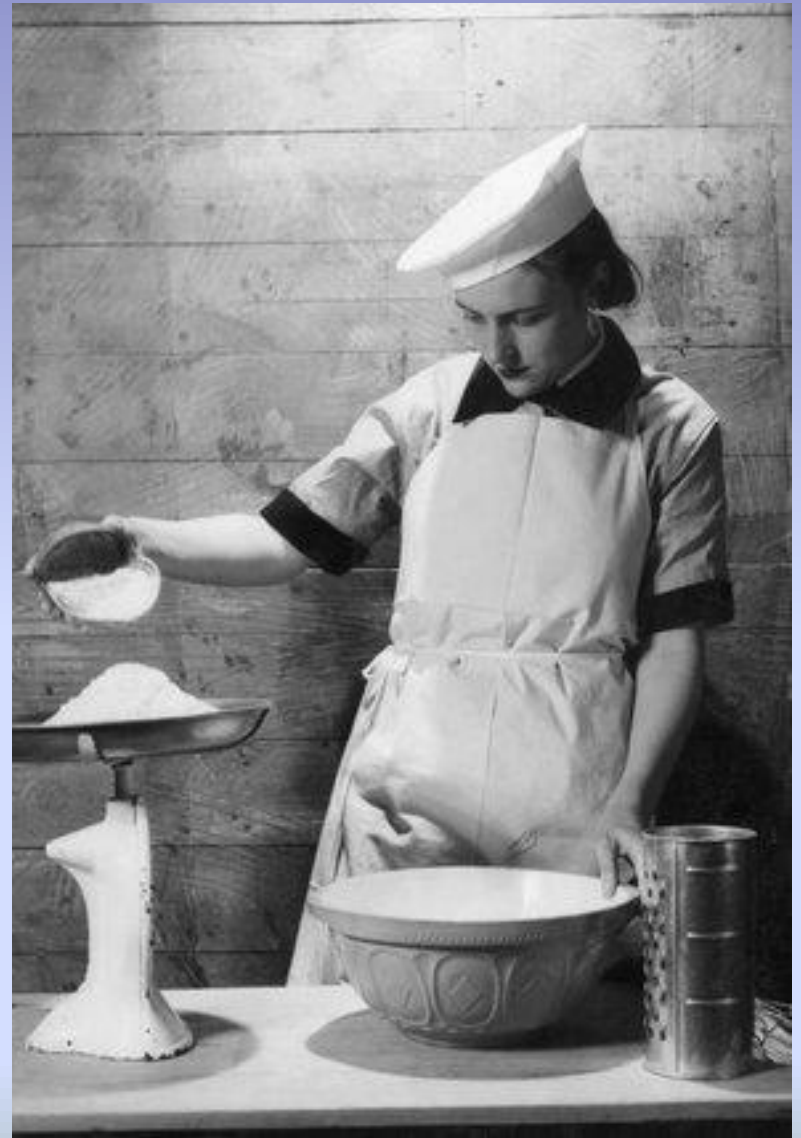


Women in the WRNS (Royal Navy) including this radio mechanic, flew test missions in planes such as the Fairley Barracuda dive bomber (behind).



Other naval roles available to women included working as transport drivers, although as this image shows, that included doing repairs.

Cecil Beaton portrait of a cook in the  
Women's Royal Naval Service.





## NEW W.R.N.S. STATUS

It has been announced on behalf of the Board of Admiralty that as from 1st February, 1949, the Women's Royal Naval Service was to be established as a permanent and integral part of the Naval Service. Members of the W.R.N.S., although not subject to the Naval Discipline Act, which is a system of discipline primarily devised to control a male Service under conditions afloat, belong to a disciplined force serving under its own disciplinary code. The W.R.N.S. is to be regarded in all respects, other than its subjection to a separate disciplinary code, as part of the Royal Navy itself.



# Burghfield newsletter

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March 2014

## The WRENS and HMS Dauntless

The HISTORY 1945-81



In the 1930's Clay Hill Road, which joined the villages of Burghfield and Burghfield Common, wound its uphill path through woods and amongst rolling fields. The onset of war brought with it the need for Ordnance factories and in September 1939 one was built a mile and a half away from Burghfield village. As time passed the able bodied men and women who worked there were recruited into the Forces and munition workers, mostly from Ireland, came over to take their place. This led to a need for local accommodation for 1,500 women and a hostel was built on the 23 acre field to the north west of Clay Hill Road. They remained there until March 1945 when for a few months the land and buildings were left unoccupied, until a certain Lt Cdr

visited searching for alternative provision for the two existing WRNS training establishments, and to find a permanent base for the WRNS. The journey from being named first WRNS Depot in July 1945, to Burghfield WRNS Training Depot, the WRNS Central Training Depot, to His Majesty's Training Establishment Dauntless, continued until the commissioning of HMS DAUNTLESS in December 1953, celebrated in June 1954.

The ship's motto 'Nil Desperandum' –



*HMS Dauntless Passing out parade 1968*

'never despair' was considered quite appropriate for the training establishment and may well reflect how many a young woman felt at first glance of the clustered buildings, the network of pipes and wires, together with their first initiation into the naval regime.

However, fond recollections of those intrepid beginnings are regularly recalled in The Wren magazine and online with photos and anecdotes illustrating what it was like to be a Wren between 1945 and 1981 (when the new entry training provision moved to HMS RALEIGH). It has been suggested that there should be some signage depicting the location of HMS DAUNTLESS which we would be very pleased to support. The Association of Wrens (Women of the Royal Naval Services) was founded in 1920 and has over 5,000 members at home and overseas, including many RN women who are currently serving. \*Extracts from HMS DAUNTLESS A HISTORY booklet £5+pp

Please contact [office@wrens.or.uk](mailto:office@wrens.or.uk) 02392 725141 [www.wrens.org.uk](http://www.wrens.org.uk)

Various images of  
DAUNTLESS

WRNS  
Training Establishment, Burghfield. [1945 – 1981]



1917–1919 ranks	1939–1993 ranks			
Officers	Ratings		Commissioned Officers	
WRNS rank	WRNS rank	Equivalent RN rank	WRNS rank	Equivalent RN rank
Assistant Principal	Ordinary Wren	Ordinary Seaman	Third Officer	Sub-Lieutenant
Deputy Principal	Wren	Able Seaman	Second Officer	Lieutenant
Principal	Leading Wren	Leading Seaman	First Officer	Lieutenant-Commander
Deputy Divisional Director	Petty Officer Wren	Petty Officer	Chief Officer	Commander
Divisional Director	Chief Wren	Chief Petty Officer	Superintendent	Captain
Deputy Assistant Director			Commandant/Director <sup>[1]</sup>	Commodore/Rear-Admiral
Assistant Director			Chief Commandant/Commandant <sup>[3]</sup>	Rear-Admiral
Deputy Director				
Director				

**1]** Until 1951, Director was both a position and a rank. In 1951, the rank of Commandant was introduced for the officer holding the position of Director. Director equated to Rear-Admiral until 1946, when it was reduced to Commodore. In common with RN Commodores, after 1946 Director/Commandant was only an appointment and not a true rank and the Directors continued to hold the substantive rank of Superintendent.

**2]** Honorary rank held by a member of the Royal Family. Until 1951, the position was called Commandant, but was renamed in that year due to the introduction of Commandant as the rank for the Director WRNS. Princess Marina, Duchess of Kent was Commandant, and later Chief Commandant, from 1940 until her death in 1968. She was succeeded by Princess Anne, who held the appointment from 1974 until 1993, when she became Chief Commandant for Women, Royal Navy; she now holds the honorary rank of Vice-Admiral.

Integration with the Navy came gradually until in 1990 conditions of service were the same for both sexes, women officers were given Naval ranks, the 1917 motto of "Never at Sea" had to be amended.

There are now some 3,000 women in this, the foremost women's Service in the world, which was used as the model for those of many other nations.

**WOMENS ROYAL NAVAL SERVICE**





.....in a nutshell!

The idea for the Women's Royal Naval Service is widely attributed to Lady Rocksavage.

She is said to have invited Sir Eric Geddes to drinks in 1917 and, upon hearing of the heavy losses the Royal Navy had suffered in the first three years of the war, said "The army uses women for shore jobs, why not the Navy"

The conversation led to the creation of the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) in November 1917 with the aim of replacing male sailors serving onshore with women.

The Admiralty set about recruiting 3,000 women but decided that they could only do 'suitable' work, for example domestic tasks, waiting at tables, cleaning and cooking.

However during its 19 month existence the number of Wrens grew to over 6,000 with the range of jobs broadening, many of which had previously been considered too difficult for women.

The Service was disbanded at the end of World War I but was reformed at the outbreak of war in 1939.

At its peak, in 1944, membership numbered over 72,000. In 1947 the Permanent Service was created but numbers were reduced again to around 3,000 with fewer trades than the 200 available to women in 1944.

The Service was disbanded in 1993 when women were integrated into the Royal Navy itself, with women being able to serve onboard ships in 1994. Women now serve on around a third of all Naval ships and make up 10% of their crews.





2Xiles  
Cloudobservers 2016

**SOURCES:**

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