

# MOM'S ARMY

## WOMEN AT RUBERY OWEN, ENGINEERS 1945-1951

Joe Krawec

The British government pursued an austerity policy between 1945 and 1951, but the national debate over rationing, consumption control and the planned economy was shaped by the attitudes of female workers and housewives themselves. Articles in *Goodwill*, the company magazine of Rubery Owen - a West Midlands-based engineering group - show how local women contributed to this debate.



A bread ration queue, 21 July 1946

On 8 May 1945, the UK celebrated Nazi Germany's unconditional surrender. There would be no more want or waiting; the war in Europe was finally over. But the next morning, as empty bottles were being cleared away from city squares, the reality of what Britain faced began to sink in like a collective hangover. The war may have finished, but want and waiting were far from done with. Austerity was here to stay.

## The Economic Environment

Britain faced financial ruin in 1945. The costs of war were colossal: huge overseas debts, a titanic balance of payment deficit and a frightening dollar shortage. How was the country to feed itself, let alone pay back its main creditor, the USA?

The answer to this question was that strict financial planning was to remain in place, with post-war economic policy prioritising exports and business investment. The British government tasked firms with selling the majority of its industrial output overseas to earn those much-needed dollars. Britain was to achieve double the annual export level of 1939 by 1950, or else.

## Rubery Owen

Rubery Owen was a company based in Darlaston, Staffordshire. Its vast catalogue of products included car components, aviation hydraulics, kitchens, office furniture, farm machinery, steel-structured buildings and even the very nuts and bolts which held it all together. Rubery Owen manufactured the things which made the world 'modern'. In 1945 it numbered just fifteen companies, but this changed when the company answered the government's call to export in spectacular fashion. By December 1946, Rubery Owen had its first overseas venture in Australia and cast a sales network across sixty countries.

Though exports were booming, UK customers had to go without. Quite simply, goods made and sold at home did not generate the currency to pay back the United States. Those lovely new washing machines were just a pipe dream to most British housewives because the government restricted the supply of consumer goods to the home market. There was little money for goods from overseas, so Britain – which had imported 50% of its food before 1939 – had to keep supplying its own produce. This meant one thing: the dreaded ration books were here to stay and would remain until 4 July 1954, some nine years after the war had ended.

## Goodwill

*Goodwill* was a quarterly magazine published by Rubery Owen for its employees. In its initial phase from Christmas 1946 to Christmas 1958, *Goodwill* was a whole-life magazine. Alongside

articles on the latest innovations in die-casting, the reader was treated to photographs from holidays, news about the company's vast sports and social network, short stories, poems and cartoons contributed not only by those working at the firm but their spouses, friends and families as well.

The timing of its birth is no coincidence. *Goodwill* met the necessity of an organisation – growing in complexity as it reached out to the world to meet its export targets – to communicate those immense changes to its members. Furthermore, with its motivational language and rousing images, *Goodwill* emulated government propaganda in magazines, posters and radio, urging people to soldier on with post-war austerity measures.

Even the title *Goodwill* was in keeping with this post-war spirit, chosen by the editors because it was 'very appropriate particularly in these days when goodwill is the basis for our struggle against shortages of all kinds.'

## Shortages and Rationing

And there were terrible shortages. On 27 May 1945, nineteen days after VE Day, rations of bacon and cooking fat were reduced. Between 1946 and 1947, bad weather conditions caused food crops to fail, thus causing bread and potatoes to be rationed for

the first time. With the justification of conflict gone, people became increasingly frustrated with austerity. Had not the British nation suffered enough? Was the war ever going to be over?

But frustration manifested in different ways according to gender. In a Gallup poll held in December 1947, food shortages and queues were the primary concern of just 38% of men compared to a massive 61% of housewives. Why was there this bias?

## Women and the War

Women and the war are most often written about in relation to their working effort. 1943 marked a highpoint in female labour participation. Of 16 million women of working age, 7.25 million were in employment, an increase of approximately 2.5 million since 1939. By 1951, female labour numbers had in fact returned to the pre-war level. Housewives comprised the majority of adult women both during the war and after.

From the start of the conflict, female domestic matters became top priority for government – women's morale and advice on how to 'make do'. The reason for this was plain: the burden of rationing and austerity fell upon those responsible for management of the household, shopping and cooking. Churchill and Attlee could not win the war or make the peace if mothers did not smile as they mashed copious amounts of banana flavouring into parsnips. Forget Dad's Army, the true Home Front was Mom's Army.



Rubery Owen poster, n.d.

Courtesy of Rubery Owen

## Women at Rubery Owen

At Rubery Owen's Darlaston headquarters in 1951, women numbered 20% of the total workforce. But in *Goodwill* women appear equally as the men, reflecting that women occupied two spheres – the domestic and the economic. When a Darlaston mother got home from a long shift in Rubery Owen's Aviation Dept. she was likely to have to cook, clean, mend and make-do also.

*Goodwill* was a journal designed to reflect all aspects of worker's lives, therefore women were portrayed in multiple roles: as machine operatives, typists, mothers, singers in the works' choir and netball players in the factory team.

## Coping with Austerity

The opinions of Rubery Owen women toward austerity and their methods of coping are evident in *Goodwill*. In the first issue in Christmas 1946, how to have a good time round an austere festive table was chiefly on the minds of all. Mrs J. Colley offered her recipe for Christmas cake and pudding using dried egg, grated carrot, lemon substitute and brandy (if available), echoing the kinds of articles Rubery Owen women would read in *Good Housekeeping* at this time.

The cartoon accompanying it has a lady pouring steel bolts into her mixing bowl: 'I said "bring some nuts coming from work" not "from work"! As another cartoon in the same issue makes clear, festive nuts were hard to come by in Black Country stores.

In Autumn 1947, readers were treated to the wedding photograph of Mrs Phyllis Read, a worker from Invicta Electrodes, Darlaston. Her dress is of interest to even modern eyes; a swell of white topped with a huge headdress. But the caption below the photograph, 'How do you like the white lace wedding dress, girls?' sums up the interest of her peers as they viewed it. Clothes and the material to make them were extremely scarce. Therefore, this dress of the newly-titled Mrs Read was a wonder. However did she manage it?

Staying in 1947, an article from the Christmas edition, 'Swiss Holiday', was an



Cartoon, *Goodwill*, winter 1946.

account of Miss A. J Pitcock's holiday to Switzerland. The focus of her story was the availability of Swiss goods and their comparative prices:

It was sheer delight to go into well-stocked shops and buy just what we pleased, amongst other things, we bought nylons or pure silk stockings at 9/- to 15/- per pair... Cigarettes, all well-known British and American makes, were about 1/7 for 20. Fruit of all descriptions was very cheap, but a cup of tea or coffee cost 1 fr. (1/2).

To Miss Pitcock, the sheer amount of things on offer must have seemed fantastic, or even decadent. 'Swiss Holiday' sums up in two pages all the frustration of a young woman struggling to clothe herself fashionably and spend her increasing salary (for British youngsters were about to become the best-paid in Europe) on leisure time in a grey, austere Britain.

In 1947, the Annual Horticultural Show was enhanced by the introduction of 'Miss Sunshine', a competition for young ladies to become 'Group Personality of the Year'. It was a beauty competition of sorts, but with a typical *Goodwill* twist. There were no swimsuit rounds or wearing of evening gowns. Instead, the title was awarded to the girls who worked the hardest and who 'spread happiness and smiles throughout the workplace, even when happiness is hard to come by.' Much like the Labour government of Clement Attlee, it seems as though Rubery Owen relied on its women for morale at this time of want.

## Austerity and Ideology

Austerity was not just an economic necessity, it was also an ideological choice. On 26 July 1945, the results of the first post-war general election were declared. Churchill's Conservatives were roundly beaten in a landslide. The country had given

the mandate to Clement Attlee and the Labour Party to commence with its post-war reforms of welfare provision, housebuilding and nationalisation. Labour was determined to make Britain a land of equality and egalitarianism. The socialist planned economy, with its central idea of income redistribution and fair shares for all, was the order of the day. And controls over the supply and demand for goods were all part of that plan.

But Clement Attlee did not have to stand in queues for hours each day to get his ration of bacon. He had Mrs Attlee to do that whilst he got on with the manly affairs of state. By the time of the next general election in 1951 male working adults had become disgruntled with Labour over pay and conditions, but these men were highly unlikely to vote against the worker's party.

If votes were to be won, the Conservatives judged, they would be from those wives and mothers disenfranchised by a remote and austere bureaucracy, engaged in the more 'male' concerns of labour and economics. True, the country enjoyed full employment and high wages in this decade, but inflationary pressures meant that this did not necessarily translate into more housekeeping money.

*Goodwill* told the story of Mrs Sarah Ann Brookes, a 67 year-old great grandmother who had worked in the Aviation Department since 1940 as a machine operator. She had supported her family on her own since her husband's death in 1926. Readers were told that this was 'a typical story of the courage and perseverance of so many women in these parts, who, in the period between the two World Wars, found that money was not so easily obtained as it is now, even if it did seem to go further.' Truly, there were votes to be won from tired, disappointed women like Mrs Brookes all over Britain.

Furthermore, what spare money women had was unlikely to be spent in a lacklustre British market, geared more towards the exports of currency-earning motor cars than carpets to furnish the hall, stairs and landing of a Darlaston terraced house. In 1947, 50% of working-class households had no carpets, although four-



'Miss Sunshine', cover of *Goodwill*, 1949.

fifths of working-class housewives expressed a desire to buy one at an affordable cost. Thus, the first mention in *Goodwill* of Rubery Owen-made Easiclene kitchens added that 'you need to move abroad to buy one.'

### Changing Political Attitudes

So whilst Labour remained the working man's party, whose frustration with austerity was overcome by jobs and higher wages, domestic female concerns were not being so readily met. But this was to prove to be a mistake. Britain – relying so much on its women to maintain the happy family status quo – found its elected government changed once more in October 1951. The massive majority of Labour was overturned, resulting in a slim win for Churchill.

The Conservatives promised British women that they would end rationing, achieve housing construction targets and abolish other controls that kept consumer products off the British marketplace. The reality of what was achieved was somewhat different. Rationing finally ceased in 1954, construction targets were actually beaten (a notable

success for the then Housing Minister, Harold MacMillan) and various other supply and price controls were to remain for another fifteen years. Nevertheless the Conservatives had won. And they won with a 20% swing from women voters in favour of Churchill's party.

If the Labour government had bothered to read its own propaganda, or indeed the pages of *Goodwill*, it would have been left in little doubt where the decisive portion of power resided. They were not alone in discounting women. History books are also guilty of this error, too often favouring that which is obvious: the economic, the social – the kinds of source one can extract easily from bureaucratic records made by men largely about other men. But the years 1945 to 1951 demonstrate the folly of ignoring the historic impact of the home. The post-war politician and historian alike would have benefitted from respecting the domestic front; the power that was Mom's Army. ●

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#### Further Reading

*Goodwill* magazine is held in the Rubery Owen Archives in the Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick.

Peter Hennessy, *Never Again: Britain 1945-51* (Penguin, 2006).

David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain 1945-51* (Bloomsbury, 2008).

Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption* (Oxford University Press, 2000).



Wedding photograph of Mrs Phyllis Read, *Goodwill*, Autumn 1947.

Courtesy of Rubery Owen

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