



Life on the Home Front

On 4 August 1914, Britain entered the First World War. While many men went to fight overseas, civilians faced rationing, bombing raids and work in reserved occupations. In Wales, women entered paid work, replacing men, while some men remained in essential jobs like mining and shipbuilding, supporting the war effort at home.

The role of Welsh women in the First World War

Before the First World War, most women's roles were in the home, with only 10% employed. By war's end, women made up 80% of Britain's workforce. In Wales, women worked in various sectors such as:

- **Women's Land Army** which was formed in 1917 and employed 228 000 women in agriculture and forestry, including the Timber Corps.
- **Munitions factories** where over 900 000 women worked in dangerous conditions in munitions, including in factories in Cardiff, Newport, and Wrexham.
- **Auxiliary services** that were established in 1917–1918 such as the WAAC, WRNS and WRAF which employed over 92 000 women combined
- **Medical professions and police** where female nurses and doctors were crucial, including the QAIMNS and the TFNS. Some women worked under challenging conditions and prejudice. The WPS was also formed in 1916.

Conscientious objectors and pacifism

There were two types of conscientious objectors.

- **Alternativists**, who were willing to aid the war effort but not fight. They worked as paramedics, drivers, messengers or in munitions and agriculture.
- **Absolutists**, who refused any involvement in the war, including home front work, often facing imprisonment.

The main reason for refusing to fight was religion, with many citing the 'though shalt not kill' commandment. There were also political and moral reasons for refusing to take part in the war.

Developments in the 1920s

After the war, 250 000 women were dismissed from their jobs to make way for returning soldiers. However, many resisted this push, unwilling to return to pre-war housework or service jobs.

The **1919 Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act** allowed women into professions and higher education, but the 1920s marriage bar forced them to leave jobs upon marriage. In 1923, Rhondda teachers protested this by joining the National Union of Women Teachers.

The **1928 Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act** granted universal suffrage, enabling women to stand for parliament. Megan Lloyd George became the first Welsh woman MP in 1929, advocating for women's rights and the Welsh language.

Racial tensions in South Wales

By the early twentieth century, Wales's population exceeded 2 million. Seaports like Newport and Barry became key coal, steel, and copper export hubs. Seamen shortages attracted British colonial workers to South Wales.

Causes of the tension

The post-war economic slump hit all industries, especially shipping. Returning soldiers faced job shortages, competition from immigrants, housing scarcity and rising resentment over immigrant relationships with white women.

The 1919 South Wales race riots

- In **Newport**, riots erupted on 6 June 1919, after a black man was attacked for allegedly insulting a white woman. This sparked attacks on non-white residents and establishments.
- On 11 June, riots spread to **Cardiff**, mainly involving white demobilised soldiers and local men of Yemeni, Somali, and Afro-Caribbean descent. Violent clashes lasted three days, with mobs looting minority homes and searching for black men beyond Bute Town.
- In **Barry**, riots followed an altercation between dock worker Frederick Longman and Charles Emmanuel, a man from the French West Indies. After Longman's fatal stabbing, mobs looted and attacked black residents, destroying a fish and chip shop owned by Mr. Gillespie, a black man married to a local white woman.

Response of the authorities

Most arrests targeted black or ethnic minority individuals. In Newport, 27 black men and three white men were arrested, while in Barry, no white men were detained.

Historians suggest that police were predisposed to blame the immigrant population for the unrest.

Historian Neil Evans states:

'Clearly the first reaction of the police and the first magistrates involved was to assume that black men were instigators of troubles.'



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