

# British “On War Service” Badges 1914-1919

White feathers stirred a government response

by Tony James



**B**RITISH “On War Service” badges are not hard to find, at militaria fairs, on the web or at the coin or antique shop. The badges, of several different types, are recognisable not only by their design but also by their date and the serial number stamped on the reverse. They show an interesting aspect of life on the home front in Britain during World War I. Lord Kitchener, the British Secretary of State for War, believed that manpower was the key to winning the war. His famous poster with the words “Your Country needs YOU” was aimed at every man in Britain who was eligible to enlist.

## Order of the White feather

The retired Vice-Admiral Charles Cooper Penrose-Fitzgerald announced on August 30 1914 that he was forming a band of 30 women who would present a white feather to “young men of public school and university education...found idling and loafing instead of setting an example to working men.” After that, white feathers were given out all over the country, although frequently, they were mistakenly given to men who had been invalided from the trenches or otherwise unqualified for military duty. This



*Alfred Leete's iconic 1914 recruitment poster image of Lord Kitchener. Image courtesy of Library of Congress.*

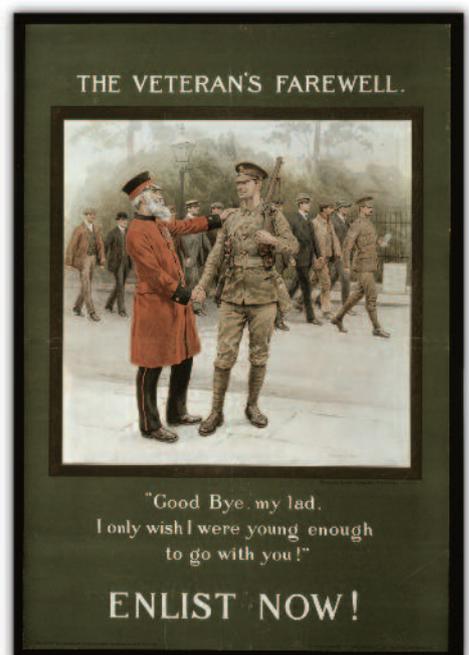
made the women concerned unpopular even among those sympathetic to the war effort and Compton Mackenzie, author and novelist who served in MI6 during the war, commented that these “idiotic young women were using white feathers to get rid of boyfriends of whom they were tired”.

Those men who necessarily remained at home in key state industries suffered unnecessary shame when they were presented with white feathers, although the pacifist Fenner Brockway proudly noted that he had enough feathers with which to make a fan.

The government's response was to authorise production of a badge bearing the legend “King and Country,” showing that its wearer was someone who should effectively be excluded from any overt moral pressure to enlist.

## Silver War Badge - honourably discharged

The Silver War Badge, instituted in September 1916 and sometimes wrongly called the Silver Wound Badge, was issued to soldiers who had been honourably discharged under Kings Regulations 392 section xvi: no longer physically fit for war service, or section xvii: surplus to military requirements (having suffered impairment since entry into the service). This may have been due to wounds received or illness contracted while on active service. Each badge is uniquely numbered on the reverse and has the words “For King and Empire” and “Services



*World War I recruiting posters in Britain carried strong emotional messages. They were designed to persuade eligible men to enlist or to shame them into doing so. Images courtesy Library of Congress.*



*Men's On War Service badge 1915 in brass*

Rendered" around the rim. In the centre is a voided cipher of King George V and a crown. On the back is a vertical pin. It is not hallmarked. Without this sort of identification these men were subject to abuse, and the horrible possibility of being presented with the white feather of cowardice. The badge was to be worn on the right breast while in civilian dress. Later in the war, medical restrictions were modified and men who had previously been discharged were able to re-enlist and were permitted to wear the Silver War Badge on their uniform.

The "Roll of Individuals Entitled to the War Badge" is held at The National Archives in Kew, under reference WO329, and a soldier's medal card will show the Silver War Badge list reference, if the badge was awarded.

#### **"On War Service" badges**

One reason for the issue of the "On War Service" badges was that when the war began, voluntary enlistment was unregulated and skilled men were joining up and leaving companies with a shortage of skilled labour essential to maintaining the country's war capability. "Badging" essential workers helped to retain those skilled workers. While these badges were unofficial, these company "On War Service" badges were tolerated by the War Office.

The Admiralty obviously thought that workers with war service badges was a good idea, as in late 1914 they issued "The Admiralty Badge" to shipyard workers "whose services were indispensable for the rapid completion of HM Ships and Armaments". The Admiralty badges were initially un-numbered and this resulted in men that were otherwise eligible for enlistment in the serv-



*This poster of 1915 stresses an equal importance between those who went to the front and those who stayed at home to help manufacture munitions and other war matériel. Image courtesy Library of Congress.*

ices wearing the badge in order to avoid service in the armed forces. This was later rectified with the issue of numbered badges in early 1916 to replace those un-numbered ones. There was a strict criterion for the issue of the Admiralty Badge and this was detailed in an Admiralty memo of September 26 1914 - that it should only be given to essential war workers and that wholesale or indiscriminate issues should not be made. The memo goes on to stress that any man who could be spared to join the armed forces should not be badged, and that any man ceasing to perform essential war work or leaving the company was to return his badge to his employer. The unauthorised transfer of a badge to another man was forbidden.

Sometime in early 1915, the War Office followed suit and issued the "On War Service 1915" badge. At first this badge was an oval badge with a blue enamelled border and a design in its centre, of three cannons on gun carriages, looking very much like the cap badge of the Army Ordnance Corps. A cheaper plain brass stamped badge was issued later, when the authorities realised the cost, of issuing large numbers of the enamelled version. The "On War Service 1915" badge was issued to men engaged in essential war work (other than shipyard work) and a list of certified occupations drawn up. Oddly, this list did not include coal miners - at a time when coal exports to France were at a million tons per month, which was half that required.

On the 27th March 1915, the War Office issued a memorandum about the 1915 and 1914 badges to recruiting officers, stressing that these were the only official badges. Private badges were still being issued by companies but these

would not provide the wearer with any protection from accusations of "shirking and slacking" and did not enable the wearer to avoid compulsory military service, which was introduced in 1916. Some of the private company badges looked quite authoritative, even using the designation "O.H.M.S." on them without permission. These private "On Service Badges" were made illegal on August 4 1915 and any companies that had been allowed to issue their own badges were instructed to withdraw them and issue official badges instead. A large number of these badges was issued, many of them enamelled and well made.

Badges sighted are Rees & Kirby Ltd 1914 of Swansea Wales, Spear & Jackson made by Thomas Fattorini of Bradford, On War Service red, white and blue banner on gold by Thomas Fattorini Bolton, Coventry Ordnance Works, C.



*Back of badge showing Thomas Fattorini of Bolton and serial number.*



Women's brass triangular  
On War Service badge  
manufactured by  
J.R. Gaunt & Sons  
Dated 1916 with  
pin fastening

Lindley & Co OHMW (On His Majesty's Work) by Vaughtons Birmingham, David Colville & Sons Ltd OHMS by W.J. Dingley B'ham and Gas Light & Power Supply "On Public Service" by Vaughtons Ltd Birmingham. The British Aluminium Co Ltd OHMS badge was issued to 11,423 workers at the company plants in London, Fife, Kinlochleven, Larne, Stoke-on-Trent and Warrington in 1915, despite not being authorised by the Ministry of Munitions.

### Women's Badge

In May 1916, the War Office (Ministry of Munitions) issued a badge exclusively for women workers. While women were not eligible for service in the armed forces and there was a lot of opposition to the issue of the badge, the Committee on War Service Badges finally gave in to pressure and issued the badge. In recognition of the valuable contribution women were making to the war effort. Many women were already wearing private company badges (although these were made illegal in 1915) and if nothing else, it would mean the wearer would get a seat on a bus!

The women's badges were triangular with a brooch pin fitting. They were issued to women working in the munitions



During World War I many British women worked alongside men in munitions factories

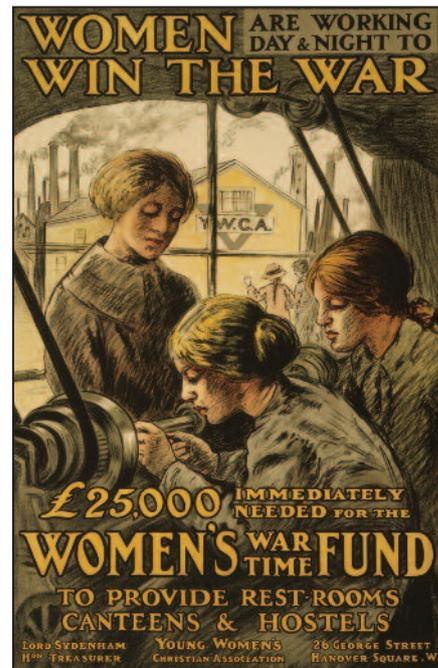
factories, including skilled and unskilled workers, clerical staff, charladies and even canteen workers. Over 270,000 "On War Service" badges were issued to women between May and December 1916.

### The Badge Makers

The companies producing the badges appear on archive lists, together with many others, as government contractors during the war years. The number of badges produced can only be estimated, although Tom Tulloch-Marshall in his article "On War Service Badges 1914-19 The Official Issues" lists some figures – 1,347,627 male badges as at July 1916 and 270,000 women's badges issued from May 1916.

The companies include:

- Arthur Fenwick & Company Ltd of Birmingham which was established in 1888 as a manufacturer of both full size and miniature medals, orders of chivalry, masonic jewels and civic regalia. In addition to manufacturing the 'On War Service 1914' badge, the company was also commissioned by the government to provide the 1914-15 Star, the British War and Victory Medals.
- D. G. Collins 1894-1960 silversmiths and badge makers of Newgate Street, London.
- Firmin and Sons which has a history that dates back to 1677 manufacturing orders, decorations, medals and state gifts, made the unnumbered 1914 blue enamel badges.
- H. B. Sale Ltd of Birmingham which is still manufacturing medals, coins, tokens and badges.
- J. R. Gaunt and Son, established in 1750, has been producing military and uniform buttons since 1870 in Birmingham and in London from 1899. It is now part of the Firmin Group, a company that specialises in the manufacturer of military uniforms and accessories.
- Mappin and Webb, who have since 1774 operated as silversmiths, with factories in Sheffield and London.



A YMCA poster of 1915 appealing for funds to assist and comfort British women engaged in war work. Image Library of Congress.

- Thomas Fattorini, manufacturers since 1827 in Birmingham and Bolton.
- Vaughtons Ltd, established 1819, regalia manufacturers of Birmingham.
- Woolley & Co. of Birmingham whose history dates back to before 1788, when it was making "1788 pattern light dragoon sabres" and later the "1796 pattern cavalry troopers sword".
- J. A. Wylie and Company, which made the women's On War Service badges as well as Girl Guide badges and badges for various railway companies.

### Unknown symbol

Some of the 1915 On War Service Badges of plain brass have a raised capital letter on the reverse below the crown; letters seen are K L M P R S T U as well as an incuse T. It is conjecture as to the meaning of this letter although with the list of certified occupations including workers in shipbuilding, mining, munitions, postal services and transport, several of the letters may be matched to recognised occupations. So, nearly a hundred years on, there are still questions to be asked and research to be done.

### References

- "On War Service" Badges, 1914-19 The Official Issues by Ton Tulloch-Marshall –originally published in issues 45 &46 of "The Armourer" magazine 2001
- Web sites – Brittons Badges, Sally Bosleys Badge Shop, Ebay
- The British & Commonwealth Military Badge Forum
- www.barnesfamilyhistory.org.uk
- Wikipedia.org/wiki/Silver\_War\_Badge\_(SWB)

White feather photograph in heading by Joao Estevo Andrade de Freitas, Image courtesy Wikimedia Commons.