



Forging Resistance:
Women Welders,
Workplace
Coalitions, and
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Wartime Britain

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This article examines Yorkshire women welders' lived experiences during the Second World War through their correspondence with former mentor Valentine Pearson, preserved in the Mass Observation Archive. Analysing letters from women at David Brown's (Penistone) and Hopkinsons (Huddersfield), this study demonstrates how working-class women actively constructed professional identities whilst navigating male-dominated industrial spaces. Employing the framework of coalition and interruption, the article reveals how these women forged tactical alliances to challenge structural workplace barriers and disrupted entrenched gender hierarchies. Moving beyond historiographical debates framing women's wartime employment through liberation-versus-constraint binaries, this study positions welders as active agents exercising agency through collective resistance and individual defiance. The welders established informal coalitions contesting wage discrimination and workplace marginalisation, engaging in sustained negotiations with management whilst creating support networks against male hostility. They challenged gendered assumptions about technical competence by asserting professional skills and demanding recognition as 'fully skilled' workers. The correspondence reveals complex gender identity negotiations, exposing how women subverted feminine stereotypes through masculine-coded qualities—assertiveness and technical expertise—whilst navigating expectations of appropriate feminine behaviour. The article seeks to move beyond traditional historiographical debates, which frame women's wartime employment through a binary lens of liberation versus constraint. Instead, it positions these women as active agents who exercised agency within existing power structures through both collective resistance and individual acts of defiance. These findings contribute to feminist labour histories by illuminating everyday acts of solidarity and resistance that operated below the purview of official narratives, demonstrating the significance of informal networks and tactical agency in the wartime experiences of working-class women.

EDITED BY ROSE BATES, COPY EDITED BY RUTH WATERSON,
REVIEWED BY HANNAH SPEED

The National Service Act (No.2) of December 1941 expanded conscription to include women for the first time in British history, responding to the urgent need for labour in essential war industries. By 1943, women comprised fifty-two per cent of the chemical workers and forty-six per cent of those in metals.¹ This dramatic increase meant women navigated traditionally male-dominated industries in new ways, forming unexpected coalitions and creating strategic interruptions within established workplace hierarchies. Among these women were two groups of welders from Yorkshire. They were trained to weld in 1942 by Valentine Pearson, a former welder and daughter of the managing director of the Welding Rods, Sheffield.² As their former mentor, Valentine occupied a unique position as both mentor and confidante, opening a space where the women could candidly discuss their workplace experience with someone who understood the technical and social challenges they faced. The women were later employed in two factories, David Brown's in Penistone and Hopkinsons in Huddersfield.³ Their letters to Valentine, subsequently archived by Mass Observation (MO), provide a rare glimpse into how working-class women actively constructed their professional identities whilst navigating male-dominated industrial spaces.⁴ MO was a research organisation founded in 1937, where volunteers and investigators were asked to report on the "everyday lives of ordinary people in Britain."⁵ MO's methodology of collecting first-hand experiences and perspectives on everyday life makes these letters particularly valuable for understanding women's lived experiences during the war.

The letters from these two groups of women draftees were written in 1942.⁶ The first group consisted of four women already working at David Brown's as core-makers, casting metal parts for military use: Helena Varley, Dorothy Adams, Joan Baines, and Violet Jessop.⁷ They were selected from sixty women in their unit to weld valves for tanks and ships.⁸ The second group of women worked at Hopkinsons factory welding tank vents and bridges. Many worked in a local mill before conscription; other previous occupations are included below.⁹ The women were Agnes Helme (previously a nanny), Amy Hargate, Emily Castle, Eleanor Hardcastle, Enid Hiley (previously a seamstress), and Jenny and Ethel Kergon.¹⁰ Four women - Amy, Helena, Joan, and

Agnes - corresponded with Valentine most frequently, and their regular communication provides intimate insights into their work lives; thus, my analysis primarily focuses on their letters. Letters provide intimate insights into how individuals construct and present their identities. As Dobson and Ziemann argue, studying letters allows historians to decipher how people in the past have used letters to "establish images of themselves through their relations with others."¹¹ The welders' correspondence with Valentine demonstrates this process of identity construction in action. They simultaneously asserted their technical competence whilst navigating the social constraints of male-dominated workplaces through their letters.

By solely examining these women's voices and experience, this article joins feminist historians' ongoing efforts to reshape labour history beyond male-dominated narratives and expand our understanding of workplace organisation and resistance through individual investigation. This article examines how these women from diverse occupational backgrounds formed tactical alliances while disrupting gendered workplace norms on the factory floor. This article employs this issue's theme of coalition and interruption as a category of analysis. For this article, the definition of coalition is broadened to include both the formal and informal networks women developed to navigate and contest workplace hierarchies. Additionally, interruption denotes their strategic disruptions of gendered expectations and assertions of professional identity. Together, these concepts illuminate how the women welders contended for agency within wartime industries.

Historians of women's wartime employment have often approached the subject through a binary framework, debating to what extent the war was a grand liberation for women. Summerfield contends that traditional exclusionary and dismissive pre-war attitudes prevailed concerning women's access to paid employment.¹² Smith develops this argument by alleging that the war may be better represented as a period of "tug-of-war" between institutions like the government and trade unions, who sought to perpetuate "traditional patterns of sex discrimination", and women's groups who pursued "permanent change."¹³ Walby criticises Summerfield for

underestimating how the war permanently reconfigured women's access to work through aspects like the institutionalisation of part-time work.¹⁴ Regarding the letters, Jolly has transcribed over fifty of them in her *Dear Laughing Motorbyke* (1997); however, her analytical coverage of the letters is relatively limited.¹⁵ This article builds upon Jolly's foundational work with the letters and moves beyond the institutional frameworks of Summerfield and Smith to examine women's lived experiences within the workplace. The letters emphasise the women's lived experience and reveal them as active agents in wartime labour organisation, an aspect often marginalised in traditional historiographical approaches. The strength of using MO sources lies in their ability to capture the "bottom-up" perspective of ordinary people's experiences, making them particularly suitable for understanding how women navigated industrial workplaces during wartime. Ultimately, this analysis seeks to echo Sheridan's call to recognise the "complexity of experience," and present a perspective emphasising everyday acts of resistance and adaptation that characterised women's wartime industrial work.¹⁶

Coalitions of Resistance

The traditional narrative of women's wartime workplace activism has often focused on high-profile, collective action by established organisations, such as the British Federation of Business and Professional Women (BFBPW).¹⁷ However, the welders' letters reveal more informal but equally significant forms of coalition-building that operated below the radar of official histories. This institutional oversight is noteworthy given that MO specifically aimed to document everyday experiences often lost in official accounts. These coalitions were critical given the structural barriers women faced in the factories. For instance, dilution agreements concerning wages were made between employers and unions in most industries. Women doing men's work would begin on a lower "women's rate" before potentially earning the "full male rate" after demonstrating technical competence and independence.¹⁸

To address wage barriers, the women at David Brown's formed a tactical coalition opposing them. In February 1942, Joan notes how their wages increased because they

"kept up until they saw to the matter."¹⁹ Her colleague Helena echoes this collective action, lamenting in her March letter, "the times we have been in the office since Christmas I would not care to count, and after all our efforts, we get a 5/-/- rise."²⁰ The repeated use of "we" infers how these women formed a unified front when confronting management. Their coordinated office visits suggest an organised approach to challenging institutional wage discrepancies. Their persistence is evident in how they "kept up" these visits until achieving their goal of better pay. Significantly, these actions represent informal collective resistance outside formal union structures, which largely excluded women until 1943 when the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU)²¹ reluctantly extended their temporary membership. Even then, women's membership was marked by their "special white membership cards," which explicitly designated their status as temporary and institutionalised the AEU's resistance.²²

At Hopkinsons, similar collaborative language emerged in response to deliberate workplace marginalisation by management. Agnes writes passionately about confronting hostile administration:

*"I have never been so disgusted in my life at the disgraceful way Hopkinsons Ltd is managed. We are not welding, we are pushed from pillar to post, and today, after asking the foreman for a job, he said, 'Just stand there in that corner'."*²³

Agnes describes how the factory management "pushed from pillar to post," signifying their little respect for the women they employed. The instruction by the foreman to stand in a corner after Agnes asked for work acts as a deliberate form of workplace displacement, as Agnes was withheld from work and implied the disdain men held against women workers.

Phillips and Taylor assess how male workers sought to "[preserve] masculine skills," which were viewed as diluted by women's entry into the workforce, through "open and fierce" hostility.²⁴ This analysis allows for understanding how the women being kept from work by male supervisors at Hopkinsons reflected broader patterns of masculine resistance to women's industrial presence. Agnes's letter clearly illustrates how male supervisors actively undermined women's position to

preserve gender hierarchies within the workplace.

Additional evidence of workplace exclusion appears in Amy's letter about Eleanor (known as Nellie), who was held back from work:

*"Nellie is beginning on Monday. She saw Marflit [supervisor] last week, and she told her to have another week, because they had nothing for her to do, what do you think about that? We have heard the men are playing hell over the women welders, so it looks like more trouble for us."*²⁵

The notion that there was "nothing" for Nellie to do appears questionable when placed within the context of the National Service Act 1941, and the surge in women's employment in essential industries from 16.3 per cent to 36.8 per cent between 1939 and 1943.²⁶ Thus, the claimed lack of work was likely a pretext for exclusion based on the systemic perpetuation of patriarchal workplace hierarchies outlined previously. Importantly, coalition is implied here through the networks the women welders created with one another, in this instance between Amy and Nellie. Amy's concern over Nellie's situation reflects an understanding that any individual's mistreatment threatened the collective position of all workers. Furthermore, Amy's detailed knowledge of Nellie's experience infers a strong and intimate communication network between the women which enabled them to support one another. Additionally, this pattern of delay and obstruction at Hopkinsons reflects what Summerfield identifies as the opposing interests of employers and trade unionists over women's position within the workplace.²⁷ Whilst Summerfield emphasises more institutional barriers, Amy's letter demonstrates how this played out in daily workplace interactions. Mrs Marflit's instruction to Nellie to delay her work implies how management-level decisions were not principally at odds with the exclusionary ideas maintained by trade unions against women. Instead, workplace management willingly reinforced these concepts, which emphasised gender discrimination under the guise of operational necessity. Furthermore, Amy's letter further reveals an awareness of being deliberately held back through the implicit linking of the lack of work for Nellie with male hostility. The fact that the women welders knew how the men were "playing hell" over them suggests how apparent hostility was within their work life. Amy goes on to acknowledge how the men's actions will ultimately

result in "more trouble" for them, which emphasises how men's workplace insecurities negatively impacted women during the war.

The letters also challenge the narrative that portrays women as passive recipients of discriminatory wage policies. While Walby argues that the "opposition of craft unions" posed the most significant challenge to women in technical industries.²⁸ However, the welders' letters directly contradict this narrow institutional view. Their correspondence reveals how these women actively navigated and contested the structural constraints the male craft union imposed through strategic collective action. Their persistent action against management over wages, though less visible than activism by organised groups like the BFBPW and LNSWS, represented women "confronting and resisting various expressions" of male power within wartime industrial settings.²⁹ Thus, the letters provide evidence of women's agency, which is often overlooked in traditional labour histories. Additionally, the letters reveal individual grievances and organised collective resistance strategies. The women welders' unified confrontation of the foreman, evident in Agnes's use of 'we', demonstrates how they transformed individual grievances into coordinated resistance. Thus, by sharing experiences and coordinating collective responses, management countered attempts to subvert, isolate, and diminish them through low wages and being held from work. Moreover, it is an explicit example of working women in a technical industry exercising their agency and self-interest within a system which sought to restrain them.

These examples demonstrate how the welders formed an informal coalition that challenged management authority and male co-workers' hostility. These everyday acts of collective resistance represented significant challenges to workplaces' gender hierarchies. By coordinating responses to management and supporting one another through exclusion, they created networks of solidarity that enabled them to navigate adverse work environments and assert their right to work.

Interrupting Gender Hierarchies

While the formation of coalitions enabled women welders to resist structural workplace barriers collectively, their acts of interruption proved equally

significant in challenging entrenched gender hierarchies in the wartime workplace. These interruptions manifested through deliberate assertions of technical competence, professional identity, and workplace rights. Through everyday acts of resistance and adaptation, these welders engaged in epistemological interruptions that temporarily destabilised the gendered assumptions about technical capability and expertise. The welders contested the institutional frameworks that sought to constrain their workplace participation and advancement.

One example of their epistemological interruptions appears in Helena's March letter, which concludes: "P.S. Please, don't forget to let us know if there are any firms in Sheffield wanting fully skilled and willing working welders."³⁰ By explicitly claiming the term 'skilled,' Helena directly challenged the gendered hierarchy that reserved technical expertise for men.³¹ During this period, women workers typically occupied the "lowest rung on the skill ladder" with inadequate wages due to women's presumed lack of training and ability.³² Therefore, Helena's deliberate self-recognition of her skill represents a conscious act of resistance against the gendered devaluation of skill. Nevertheless, Helena beckons for her skill to be recognised by any firms in Sheffield, that not only is she skilled but 'fully skilled.' Her assertion, like Amy's when she demands welding work, demonstrates how these women perceived themselves as competent professionals whose abilities warranted recognition. These letters reveal how women workers' self-perception fundamentally disrupted societal expectations that their gender identity should conform to passivity, particularly in technical fields dominated by men.

The women's insistence on their right to practice welding further demonstrates their interruption of gender hierarchies. Amy shares her fears of being displaced from welding, confiding with Valentine: "Honest, I am having a fit of fear they would put me on some other jobs to cut out. Tell your father to demand my presence in the welding, will you please?"³³ Her fear of being "cut out" reflects how precarious the position of women in technical industries was, with male trade unions, like the AEU discussed earlier, actively resisting their inclusion. Similarly, Amy's plea for Valentine's

father to intervene in securing her a job welding demonstrates the complex power dynamics, highlighting how women often needed to work through male authority figures to challenge gender-based restrictions. Whilst Amy's use of "demand" may reflect her character, by which she was remembered by Valentine as "forthright," which emphasises how Amy viewed herself as entitled to work rather than work as a privilege bestowed upon her.³⁴ These assertions of skill and professional identity interrupted prevailing discourse, which posited women's wartime workforce participation as temporary and secondary to men. The women welders stood against the fundamental assumptions surrounding gender and technical ability underpinning the wartime workplace.

Negotiating Gender Identity at Work

The women welders subverted and interrupted their 'feminine' identity through possessing typically 'masculine' qualities such as assertiveness, independence, and skill. These masculine qualities were displayed in the examples discussed throughout the article, such as their role in pay disputes, asserting their will and right to work, and self-recognition of skill. Whilst it is apparent that these women subverted feminine stereotypes, there are several examples of women navigating and displaying their femininity in the welding workshop.

Weeks argues that an employer's job involves "actively managing workers' gendered identities."³⁵ This framework provides a basis to contextualise and analyse Amy's behavioural shifts:

*"I have given up [swearing] nearly since that afternoon because Mr. Robinson was disgusted. Also he does not like girls who drink, so for his benefit I have given up all these bad habits and believe me it is not taken much doing. Honest, I would give up anything for him because he is a real good boss."*³⁶

Mr Robinson was a well-liked foreman at Hopkinsons, as evident by Amy's flattering description above. Amy acknowledges several changes in behaviour, such as stopping swearing or drinking alcohol, on the account that Mr Robinson does not like them. The power imbalance between supervisor and worker appears

exemplified through their embodiment of gender hierarchies. Mr Robinson seems to be “actively managing” Amy’s identity by enforcing traditionally feminine ‘ladylike’ conduct through his disapproval of her displaying typically rowdy and masculine behaviours.³⁷ Thus, revealing how male supervisors acted as arbiters of what constitutes appropriate feminine behaviour in the workplace. Overall, Amy’s letter reveals the complex negotiation of gender identity in a wartime workplace and how she navigated expectations of feminine decorum enforced and expected by male superiors.

The welders’ relationship with their work attire reveals another dimension to their gender identity negotiations in the workplace. Amy’s November account of acquiring new overalls highlights how the welders actively managed their presentation at work:

*“We’ve got a new bib and overalls each, except Alice. We have such a performance when we go to the corner, having to take the boiler suit off, we thought we would have a change. So we step all in, and in new battle dress tomorrow.”*³⁸

Whilst the welders’ primary concerns remained practical, Amy’s militaristic characterisation of their workwear as a “battle dress” transformed a symbol of industrial masculinity into a declaration of women’s rightful place in wartime production. This mirrors Summerfield and Crockett’s observations of women in the Services who modified their uniforms to counter “perceived defeminising effects” of the masculine workforce.³⁹ The welders simultaneously inhabited their industrial role through appropriate protective clothing while finding ways to maintain and express their feminine identity through their choices about and attitudes towards that clothing.

This illustrates Weeks’ observation that at times “doing the job is what it means to do gender,” where the workplace becomes a stage where gender identities are performed and contested.⁴⁰ The welders neither wholly rejected feminine norms nor were utterly subsumed by them. Their strategic adaptation reveals how gender performance became inseparable from occupational identity, creating a hybrid form of femininity that challenged traditional boundaries without overtly

rejecting them. Their practices demonstrate that gender is not merely imposed but actively negotiated through daily workplace interactions, where technical skill became both a professional necessity and a means of gender reconfiguration. This complex negotiation of gender identity forms part of a broader pattern of interruption and adaptation which characterised women’s industrial participation in the war. Further, these interruptions were not temporary deviations but rather moments of possibility that exposed the constructed nature of gendered divisions of labour. By simultaneously claiming traditionally masculine-coded technical competence, whilst maintaining certain feminine practices, these women created spaces where gender categories became malleable, revealing how wartime necessity enabled subtle yet significant challenges to gendered work structures.

Conclusion: Reframing Women’s Wartime Agency

The letters from Yorkshire’s women welders provide a nuanced perspective on how working-class women navigated wartime industry through both coalition and interruption. These letters aid in moving beyond the binary lens of liberation versus constraint that has characterised much historiographical debate. They reveal how women exercised agency within existing power structures by forming tactical alliances whilst strategically disrupting gender hierarchies. Their experiences challenge the focus on institutional policies and formal collective action that has dominated historical accounts of women’s wartime work. The informal coalitions they built—from persistent wage negotiations to shared information networks—represent significant, if less visible, forms of resistance. Meanwhile, their interruptions of gendered skill hierarchies, workplace marginalisation, and feminine expectations demonstrate how women actively shaped their professional identities despite structural constraints. In repositioning these women as active agents rather than passive subjects of wartime policies, this article contributes to a fuller understanding of how gender and labour intersected during this pivotal period in British history. Their letters reveal that everyday moments of solidarity and defiance played a crucial role in reshaping Britain’s wartime industrial landscape beyond high-profile activism by established organisations.

Footnotes

1. Robert A. Hart and Elizabeth J. Roberts. "Women Workers in Essential British Metal and Chemical Industries during the Second World War and the Immediate Post-war Years," IZA Discussion Papers, No.16407, (2023): 8; Penny Summerfield, *Women Workers in the Second World War: Production and Patriarchy in Conflict*, (Routledge, 2013), 151.
2. For more information on how Valentine Pearson began welding see: Margaretta Jolly, *Dear Laughing Motorbyke: Letters from Women Welders of the Second World War*, (Scarlett Press, 1997), 10.
3. Jolly, *Dear Laughing Motorbyke*, 1-2
4. Valentine sent the letters to MO herself as she was part of the Sheffield MO volunteer board.
5. "The History of Mass Observation," About Mass Observation, Mass Observation
<https://massobs.org.uk/about-mass-observation/>.
6. Jolly, *Dear Laughing Motorbyke*, 4.
7. Jolly, *Dear Laughing Motorbyke*, 1.
8. Jolly, *Dear Laughing Motorbyke*, 4, 12.
9. Jolly, *Dear Laughing Motorbyke*, 4, 12.
10. Jolly, *Dear Laughing Motorbyke*, 3-4, 7.
11. Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Ziemann, *Reading Primary Sources: The Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century History*, Routledge, 2008, 64.
12. Summerfield, *Women Workers*, 1.
13. Harold Smith, "The Womanpower Problem in Britain During the Second World War," *The Historical Journal* 27, no.4 (1984): 945.
14. Sylvia Walby, *Patriarchy at Work: Patriarchal and Capitalist Relations in Employment, 1800-1984*, (John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 188.
15. Jolly, *Dear Laughing Motorbyke*, see Introduction.
16. Dorothy Sheridan, "Ambivalent Memories: Women and the 1939-45 War in Britain," *Oral History* 18, no.1 (1990): 33.
17. Harold Smith, "The Problem of 'Equal Pay for Equal Work'," *The Journal of Modern History* 53, no.4 (1981): 655.
18. Smith, "The Problem of 'Equal Pay for Equal Work'," 655.
19. Jolly, *Dear Laughing Motorbyke*, 4; Correspondence from Joan to Valentine, February 1942, SxMOA1/2/32/3/3, The Keep, Brighton, Sussex. Note: some letters are better dated than others.
20. Note '5-/' refers to shillings; Correspondence from Helena to Valentine, March 1942, SxMOA1/2/32/3/3, The Keep, Brighton, Sussex.
21. Summerfield, *Women Workers*, 157.
22. Summerfield, *Women Workers*, 157.
23. Correspondence from Agnes to Valentine, August 1942, SxMOA1/2/32/3/3, The Keep, Brighton, Sussex.
24. Anne Phillips and Barbara Taylor, "Sex and Skill: Notes Towards a Feminist Economics," *Feminist Review* No.6, (1980): 86.
25. Correspondence from Amy to Valentine, Month Unknown 1942, SxMOA1/2/32/3/3, The Keep, Brighton, Sussex.
26. Harts and Roberts, "Women Workers," 6.
27. Summerfield, *Women Workers*, 179.
28. Walby, *Patriarchy at Work*, 191.
29. Penny Summerfield and Nicole Crockett, "'You Weren't Taught That With the Welding': Lessons in Sexuality in the Second World War," *Women's History Review* 1, no.3 (1992): 451.
30. Correspondence from Helena to Valentine, March 1942.
31. Phillips and Taylor, "Sex and Skill," 79.
32. Phillips and Taylor, "Sex and Skill," 79.
33. Correspondence from Amy to Valentine, 11 September 1942, SxMOA1/2/32/3/3, The Keep, Brighton, Sussex.
34. Jolly, *Dear Laughing Motorbyke*, 7.
35. Kathi Weeks, "The Problem with Work," *Global Histories of Work*, ed. Andreas Eckert (De Gruyter, 2016): 299.
36. Correspondence from Amy to Valentine, October 1942, SxMOA1/2/32/3/3, The Keep, Brighton, Sussex.
37. Weeks, "The Problem with Work," 299.
38. Correspondence from Amy to Valentine, November 1942, SxMOA1/2/32/3/3, The Keep, Brighton, Sussex.
39. Summerfield and Crockett, "'You Weren't Taught That With the Welding'," 447.
40. Weeks, "The Problem with Work," 299.

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This article would like to acknowledge and thank the Trustees of the Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex, for their permission for use of the letters in this piece.

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Joan Baines to Valentine Pearson. February 1942. Mass Observation Archive, SxMOA1/2/32/3/3. The Keep, Brighton.

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