

First World War – The Role of Women:

Pre-war:

Before the outbreak of war in August 1914, women held very traditional roles in family life. Working class women were still tied to the home or continued to work for very low wages in factories, on farms or as domestic servants. The expansion of women's education allowed some women to enter careers which had previously been male dominated, but only those careers that were deemed suitable, such as teaching, nursing and office work. An emerging women's movement campaigned to liberate women and to change these traditional roles, campaigning for rights such as the vote (suffrage).



During the War:

Mobilisation of industry was a key factor in the First World War. The side which produced the greater amount of munitions (guns, tanks etc.) stood a better chance of victory.

The government extended its power over the economy. There was a huge shortage of workers. Industry and agriculture demanded men, but so did the army. The labour shortage needed to be dealt with, and women filled this gap. Although many working class women were already in employment, they mainly held traditional female roles in domestic service or in textile factories and mills. During the War, more opportunities opened up to women and the types of jobs they undertook changed. Women began to make war products such as guns and ammunition, taking on jobs operating heavy machinery and driving vehicles. The Women's Land Army was formed to ensure food production continued as so many male agricultural labourers were in the army.

Women also headed to the War front to work in hospitals, treating injured soldiers, while many nurses continued to help the injured at home. By 1918 there were 1.3 million more women at work than in 1914. Women were now more visible in the world of work, and although they were employed in important roles and received improved wages, they were still paid lower rates than men.

Whilst women undertook more 'male' jobs, the significance of their traditional role of wife and mother was also emphasised. Women were told they had a patriotic duty to encourage their men to fight in the war. They also helped the men at war to remain motivated, sending more than 12 million letters and parcels to the troops every week, and reminding them about the home and family they would return to after the War.

After the war:

The end of the War meant that women were expected to return to their previous roles and allow the returning soldiers to take back their jobs. Whilst the number of women in work returned to pre-war levels, the War did result in a number of permanent changes. A wider range of jobs were now available to women. Changes in style and appearance made necessary by war work - wearing trousers and short hair - became fashionable. World War I had proven that women could do a wide range of work and do them well. By 1928 all women were granted the right to vote, reflecting their changed status within society.

First World War – The Role of Women:



Task 1: Write a letter to your husband posted in France.

You are a woman living during World War I whose world has changed dramatically since the outbreak of the War. Your husband is stationed in France and you now work in a factory.

Write a letter about the changes that have happened, describing what life is like for you, and your thoughts and feelings about your changing role.

Explain what you think will happen when the War is over and/or what you hope will happen.

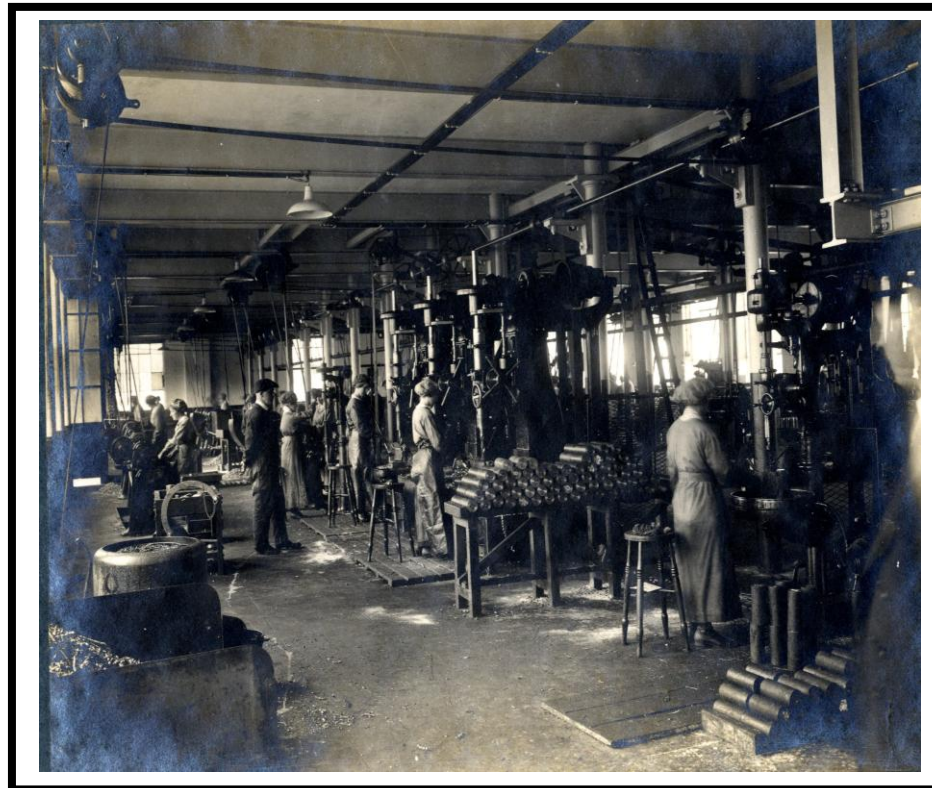


Think about:

- Who you are – a wife, a mother, a sister, etc?
- What your life was like before the War? Consider your background, your previous role and what you wore/ looked like/ enjoyed doing.
- What work have you taken on during the War? What is your job? What does the factory manufacture?
- What a day in your life is like now – compare this to a day in your life before 1914 and war.
- Your thoughts and feelings about your changing role in society – Is it positive/ negative? Do you want change or a return to the traditional roles?
- How other men and women feel about women's changing roles
- What do you think the future will be like? Will your role change? Will your job change? Why? What would you like for the future?



First World War – The Role of Women: Jobs/Roles



First World War – The Role of Women:

Task 2

Look at the pictures of women during the First World War. Make a list of the many jobs/roles women took up to help with the war effort.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

Are there any other jobs that women took up during the First World War?

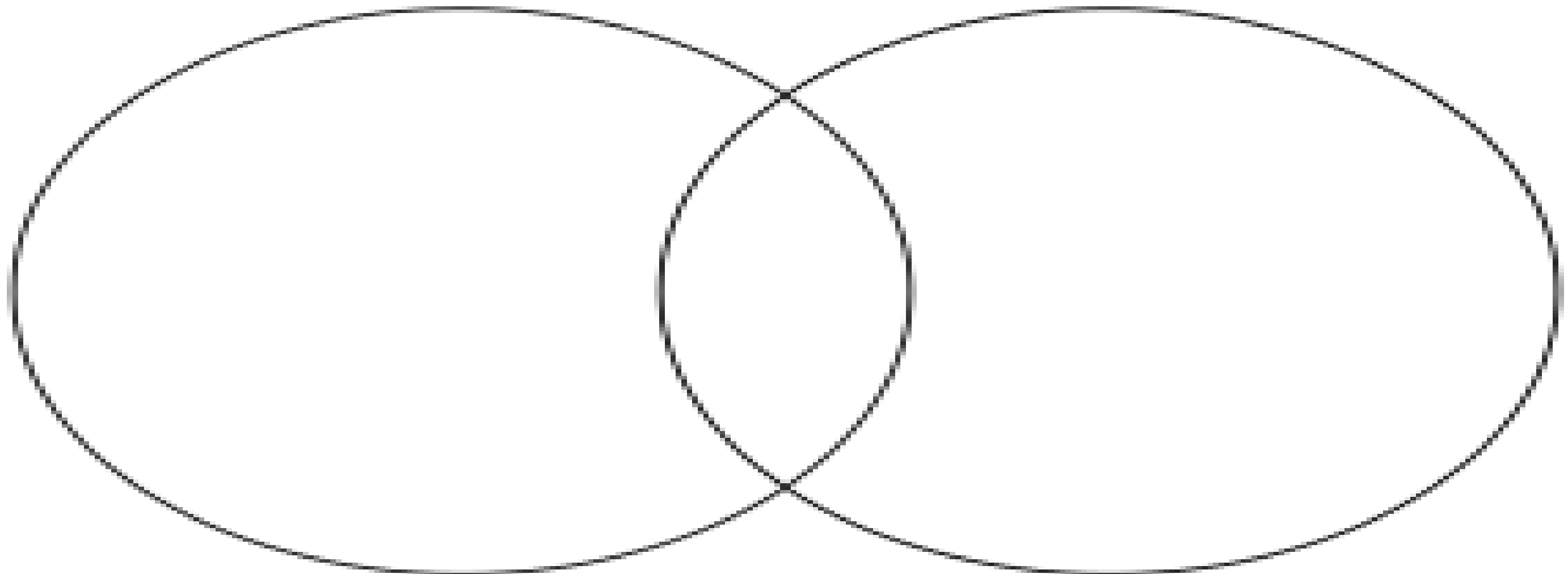
Task 3

Complete the Venn diagram using the jobs/roles in Task 2 and the list below.

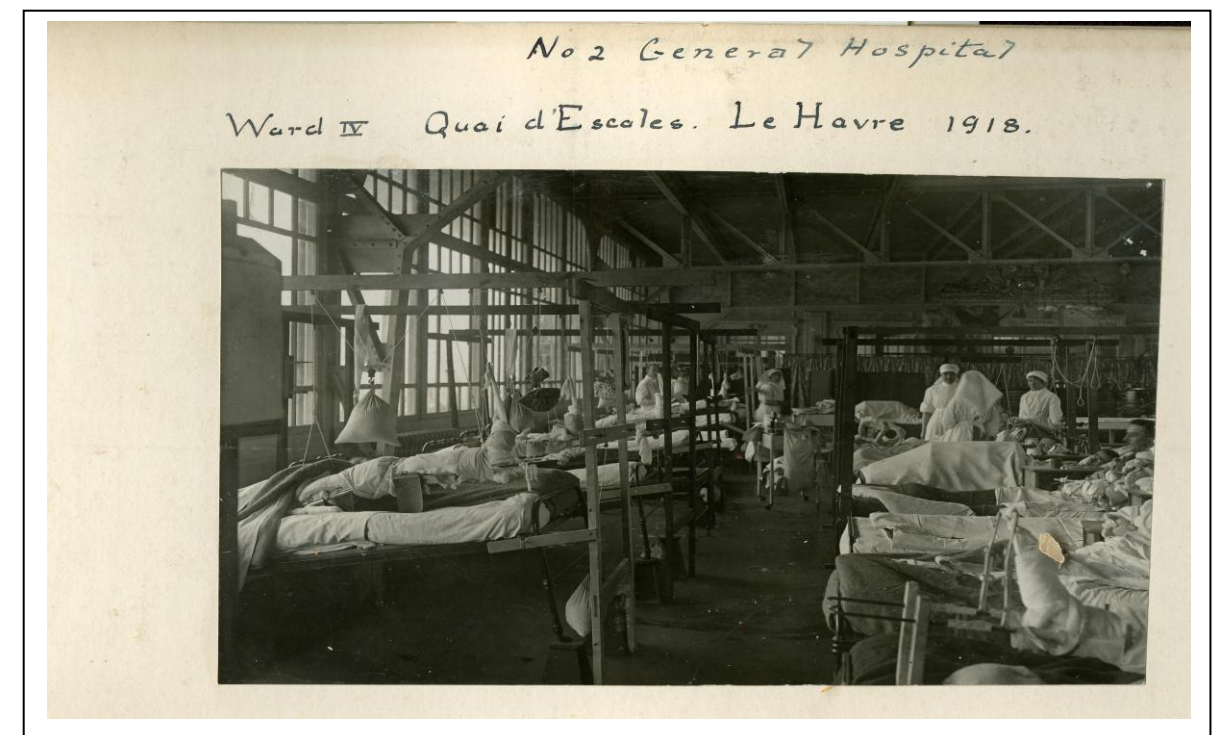
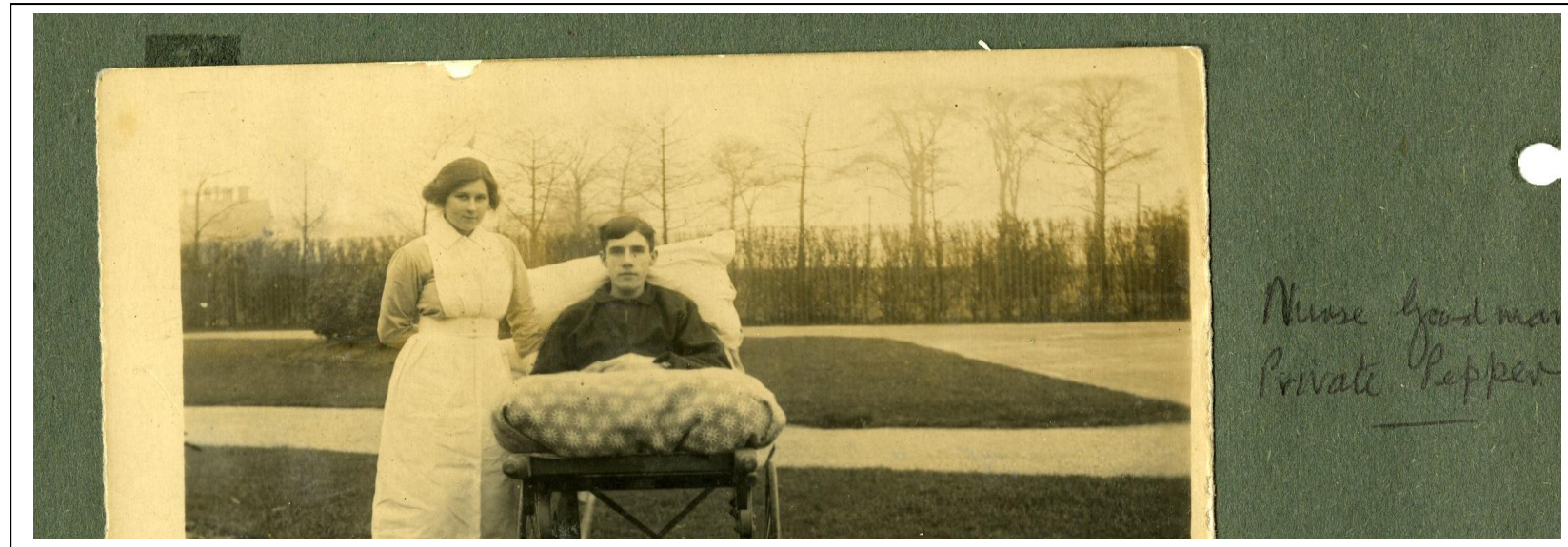
You must decide if the job/role or something similar was done before the war only, only during the war or both. Remember to label your Venn diagram.

- policing
- welding
- agricultural roles
- teaching
- office worker
- wife/girlfriend of soldier
- cleaning staff
- train driver
- housewife
- mother
- servants

Women Before and During the War



First World War – The Role of Women: Changes from then to now



First World War – The Role of Women:

Task 4:

Compare and contrast the pictures above about nursing, and describe what is going on in the photos.

Then compare a nurse from the First World War to a modern nurse from today.

You may use your own knowledge or the internet to find details of a modern nurse.



Task 5:

Imagine you are a young woman during the First World War, who for one day, gets to travel through time to the present day.

Write a diary account about what it is like today in comparison to working in a war factory.

How do you think a girl from the First World War would feel living now?

Why would she feel like this?

What differences are there?

Which would she prefer?

