

Class, race, sex and food in wartime Wiltshire: Swindon's 'Welcome Club' 1944-1945

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Swindon and its Welcome Club

On 4 March 1944 Mr A Corkill, local welfare officer of the Ministry of Labour and National Service, wrote to David Murray-John, town clerk of Swindon, suggesting a conference about the welfare of women and girls working in local factories. Possible agenda items included the town's lack of eating and drinking places, evening opening of British Restaurants, the welfare of women and girl munitions workers, and sex education in factories and schools. Significantly, Corkill referred to complaints from local United States military authorities about the town's inadequate recreational and care facilities. Although US officers said that all transport back to the many camps around Swindon left the town at 11 p.m., the Ministry of Labour regretfully 'drew attention to the fact that many [US troops] still remained in the town at a late hour'.¹

The conference took place on 11 April, chaired by the mayor and attended by representatives of the town's Welfare Advisory Panel, Council of Churches, American Red Cross (ARC), Women's Voluntary Services (WVS), Trades Council, Chamber of Commerce and individual councillors. They talked about the problem of footloose US troops: there was 'great need of suitable premises under appropriate supervision where proper social intercourse could take place'. After consultation between the local authority, the WVS and the Ministry of Information (MoI) a further meeting on 22 June agreed that a 'Welcome Club' should be set up in the East Street Co-operative Hall, a handsome brick building erected in 1912 for the New Swindon Industrial Co-operative Society – which now houses two night clubs and some miscellaneous printing firms. Additional evening catering was to be provided at the British Restaurant in nearby Maxwell Street. The regular dances, a key feature of all such clubs, were held in the ballroom of

the Civic Playhouse, part of the railwaymen's Mechanics Institution – presently derelict and the subject of a campaign by a local preservation trust.

The Borough Council contributed £50 to help equip the Club with books, games and so on. A further £30 came from the MoI.² Eventually the Council's Finance Committee authorised expenditure up to £600 to cover costs of converting the hall and putting in the necessary catering and other equipment. A skeleton committee was in place by 6 July, with the town clerk as honorary secretary. The club opened at the end of the summer and a paid organiser was appointed in October with a salary of £350.³

WRVS records imply it was that organisation which initially suggested to the MoI the idea of setting up small clubs wherever US troops were stationed. This may be true, but does not tell the whole story. Supervised by a committee chaired by Sir Edward Grigg, a Tory MP and former War Office minister, the Council of Voluntary War Work brought together a number of organisations, including the YMCA, Salvation Army, Church Army and "Toc H" – Talbot House, a society founded after the First World War to promote Christian fellowship and social service among young men. By 1944 several of these were running 'Anglo-American Service Clubs' with the common aim of 'doing everything possible to further the good relations and understanding between the American Forces and the people of this country'. In Swindon the first facility, dating from around 1943, was in the town hall, run by the YMCA. Such clubs were not necessarily restricted to US servicemen; indeed, the WVS insisted that US and other allied servicemen and civilians should mingle in the Welcome Clubs. As we shall see, this was not the preference of the US authorities.

The first WVS Welcome Club opened, in Sunbury, towards the end of 1943; eventually there were 200 throughout Britain. They were to be places where 'people of good character on both sides could make each others' acquaintance in an orderly way'. The clubs 'were started in the simplest way in large rooms in private houses, in Church or village halls or wherever a reasonably sized room with a fire, a gramophone or piano could be found'.⁴ Members were supposed to be local girls, picked by 'A committee of elder and respected local people', paying five shillings (25p) per quarter, and 'selected Americans' nominated by senior officers or the chaplaincy. The clubs were run by self-elected committees and expected to finance themselves. Some idea of the financial health of the Swindon club comes from the dance hall account: in October 1944 receipts totalled £371, direct expenses £111, including £88 to the dance band which performed six nights each week.

By November, the Swindon club was in full swing in the East Street hall. It offered modest refreshments, games, books and a reading room. Letters to the local newspaper complained over the absence of a wireless or a radiogram, and the poor quality of the piano. Even so, the organiser, Norman Liddiard, reported up to 600 people a day using its facilities, with Sunday the busiest day; he believed that better publicity could attract even more. The regular schedule of events included dancing lessons (Tuesdays), discussion groups (Thursdays), concert parties and socials. Liddiard said he thought that behaviour was improving: 'I felt satisfied we had . . . a keen and reliable groups of youths'. Nevertheless the town clerk had to write more than once to the US Military Police about how important it was for them to have a visible presence at the Playhouse dances; theatre-goers downstairs complained about the crush occasioned by the numbers of troops and girls attending the dances who tended to monopolise the building.⁵

Surviving WVS records focus almost entirely on the practicalities of running the Welcome Club – how to provide food and drink for the American troops and their local guests. Letters between the WVS regional organiser and Murray-John were mainly about kitchen equipment and rations, exemplified by 'Investigations . . . under way over the possibility of help with dried milk, tea and saccharine'.⁶ WVS headquarters advised on the quality and quantity of food to be served:

Ideas as to what would best make [the GIs] happy were conflicting, but of one thing we were sure – they would not like our coffee. It is essential that the coffee be good, and for this it is necessary to see that the coffee is made in the most perfect way, and not in the hotch potch way that most people make it.

A government circular issued to US troops arriving in the UK put it tactfully: the 'British don't know how to make a cup of coffee; you don't know how to make a good cup of tea: it's an even swap'. The only 'instant' brand was 'Camp' coffee and chicory essence. Few families in a small town like Swindon regularly bought or drank 'real' coffee; how exotic it would have appeared in the 1940s was brought home to me by one interviewee who had been a schoolgirl in Swindon during the war: more than half a century later she could pin-point the location of the 'rival' American Red Cross club (see below) by recalling the aroma of fresh coffee which wafted out of the door as she cycled past. To meet this need the WVS distributed ground coffee under the 'Red and Green' brand name. As to food, the Americans were said to,

take the dimmest views of British "stacked, pressed down sand-

wiches", by which they mean made beforehand, stacked one on top of the other, and pressed down because they are stale and not made individually . . . if we serve apple pie and salad, or chicken salad sandwiches, the boys would flock in for them. They don't mind paying expensively for them . . . in fact, on the Airfields they pay 30 cents for a ham salad sandwich . . . apparently their greatest dislike is a British tomato sandwich.⁷

More generally, Welcome Club organisers were told to aim for 'a club, not a canteen', offering entertainment and education as well as coffee and sandwiches; 'The most popular thing of all is, of course, to have somebody at the piano who can play all the tunes asked for, running from "Way Down Upon the Swanee River" to "Abide With Me"'.

Sisters under the uniform? WVS and ARC

Laura studied her sister dispassionately. She was so formidable in her green uniform.

. . . She was . . . firm as a rock, much more efficient than poor Laura. Perhaps it's because I haven't got a proper uniform, thought Laura, who as a member of the ARP, had only a badge and an armlet. Uniform made such a difference, even to Women. [Barbara Pym, *Goodbye, Balkan Capital* (1987)].

The American Red Cross was the official provider of rest and recreation for US troops overseas. For reasons of military discipline, training and morale, and to minimise friction between troops and civilians, the US authorities' strong preference was to keep their servicemen as insulated as possible, and for all their 'welfare' needs to be met from American sources. In February 1942 an agreement had been reached that the Army would take care of welfare on the bases, while the American Red Cross would cater for troops off base, especially in popular leave destinations like London and Bath.⁸ By 1943 the first ARC clubs were in operation, some of them in requisitioned hotels, but also – perhaps the best remembered – Rainbow Corner on Piccadilly.

The WVS puts a different emphasis on things, starting with the arrival of the first GIs in Northern Ireland in January 1942. There had not been time to prepare ARC or other American facilities and so WVS officers leapt into the breach with characteristic vigour, meeting the troops on the quayside and organising hospitality of every kind. The formidable WVS chair, Lady Reading, and the rest of the hierarchy were determined, contrary to the American view, to maximise contact between the GIs and British civilians, including arranging for individual

servicemen to visit British families in their homes. This was a policy about which both US military and British government sources were sceptical, although there is anecdotal evidence that in the end such visits were thoroughly enjoyed by all concerned. An understanding between ARC and WVS that the former should provide residential and day clubs in the larger towns, while WVS and other British voluntary bodies set up recreational centres in smaller towns and villages was never formalised, and certainly did not apply in Swindon. By 1944 the ARC club in Cromwell Street – where my interviewee recalled the smell of coffee – was in full swing, ARC officers having successfully ‘poached’ at least two teenage female volunteers from the older, possibly YMCA canteen in the town hall.

There could hardly have been a greater contrast between the ARC, well-resourced, familiar, part of the US official machine, with prescribed duties, whose officers were relatively young, smartly turned out American women, and the WVS – mainly middle-aged, middle-class English ladies in green tweed suits and hats, with little money and somewhat fuzzy lines of responsibility to the government. In many accounts the WVS has come to symbolise the unofficial, *ad hoc*, amateur way in which Britain prepared for and ran the wartime home front – the downside of Angus Calder’s *Myth of the Blitz*.

The two organisations had come together early in the war in connection with the parcels of food and clothing donated by Americans; on 9 November 1939, Norman Davis, Chairman of the ARC, wrote to Lady Reading about using the Personal Service League⁹ for distributing what came to be known as ‘Bundles for Britain’, and by the end of the war some ten and a half million garments had been sent from the USA to Britain. Difficulties quickly arose because of differences in the constitutions of the American and British Red Cross societies, and the need, which the WVS did not perhaps fully appreciate, to differentiate between the use of funds to help ‘refugees’ – including British civilians bombed out of their homes – and other civilians. Especially during the first two years of the war, when the USA was neutral, the ARC had to show its funders that it was differentiating between civilian and military relief.

Once US troops started to arrive in the United Kingdom, with both organisations in business to meet the need for social facilities, the way things were organised seems bound to have caused friction. The ARC, using donations from American citizens, paid for the staff and food at the clubs it ran, but the cost of acquiring, renovating and equipping the clubs was financed by the UK government, through MoI’s budget. By 1943, when the ARC had over 50 clubs in operation, on and off base,

there were only 400 ARC officers, compared with around 6,000 British paid staff and many thousand volunteers.¹⁰ The comparative affluence of the American Red Cross, and the suspicion that it paid its local staff more than the going rate was one source of friction between it and British organisations. It was not always money that attracted the British staff: the two Swindon volunteers 'poached' from the town hall canteen moved because the ARC was better organised, with a proper rota, so that the British girls got a share of the plum jobs, like serving on the reception desk, as well as the catering chores. They also got a proper uniform.¹¹

The WVS hierarchy was jealous of its own voluntary and unpaid status. The issue was aired in a tart exchange of letters in 1944. The WVS chair-woman had been visiting a number of American bases and, according to her own account, had incautiously mentioned to the American 'zonal' director how 'miserable' she was that people had to be paid for this type of work, 'whereupon he immediately jumped down my throat and told me that they were paying no more than other people'. In a letter to American Red Cross HQ Lady Reading explained she had meant only that she 'wished to goodness nobody anywhere, at any time, need be paid' but that it could all be done by volunteers; afterwards, she added, she and the affronted American director 'laughed together'.¹²

In August 1942 Lady Reading had cause to write to the ARC chairman, Norman Davis, about a 'whispering campaign' she had uncovered in Britain which took as its motive the 'ridiculous idea' that the WVS wanted to 'swamp' the American Red Cross and to do all the welfare for the American troops. Reading assured Davis that this was nonsense, and suggesting that it was, perhaps, 'started by fifth column agents'; she could only suppose that perhaps 'in our great gratitude' the WVS might have been over zealous in offering services to everyone. In a moment of not uncharacteristic candour she added that her own 'direct approach' could sometimes be annoying to people 'who do not know [Britain] as intimately as you do'. And, part of the problem, she later wrote, was that people in the United States 'never quite understand the British approach to both publicity and propaganda'. It was 'fallacious' that British people would resent the lack of publicity for the work done by volunteers because:

the British would consider it almost an impertinence, if I may say so, for you to state that we were helping, when we have always taken it as *sine qua non*, and we should be very ashamed of our people if they were not volunteering.

The kind of difference or misunderstanding which we can visualise gen-

erating recriminations between American professionals and British volunteers is exemplified by one throwaway reference in the same correspondence to occasions when 'American workers who previously did not know the country' made 'wrong decisions' about British volunteers having to 'forsake their own organisation and not wear their own badge', decisions which, the letter implies, were then revoked by Washington under pressure from WVS HQ.¹³

The surviving papers about the 1944 conference in Swindon, and the setting up of the Welcome Club, however, are silent on these differences of aim, culture and organisational ability. The tenor of the WVS correspondence is strictly practical, the provision of food and beverages – buns, coffee and soft drinks – for American troops and their local hosts. Letters between the WVS and Murray-John are about kitchen equipment and rations, not the problematical relations between competing welfare organisations.

'Them and us', class and colour

A single quotation from Angus Calder's *The People's War* illustrates both the WVS' undoubted logistical ability – getting food to where it was needed – and the perceived inseparability of that sort of service from the British class structure. Calder quotes an 'unimpressed' American, watching WVS loading up a food trailer during the blitz; they reminded him 'of the housewives of a small village preparing a light refreshment for a charity bazaar'. The WVS was built round

the sorts of ladies who provided light refreshments. Not many working-class women had time for such activities, so the familiar English voluntary lady tended to pronounce her aitches with an air of effortless superiority which provoked laughter in sophisticated circles and dark resentment in the lower orders.¹⁴

WVS publications like to show it as classless: 'if titles and rank were eliminated . . . a real team spirit could be inculcated'. But some of the detail they contain has the opposite impact on the reader. The first members of the WVS included one civil servant, snatched from the Home Office, Lady Reading and four friends – two also titled ladies – who had worked with the Personal Service League; their original office was

a single room in Horseferry House, then the Headquarters of the A.R.P., and there were only four chairs. But as Lady Reading's rank

entitled her to a carpet, the fifth member of the staff was not too uncomfortable.¹⁵

In *The People's War*, Calder tended to the view that the WVS 'transcended its apparently basic middle classness': there were simply not enough middle-class women for all the jobs and, especially during the chaotic and bloody street scenes of the blitz. Then, any housewife might find herself drawn into the task of distributing clothing and providing cups of tea, bandages and bedding. 'It is quite impossible to tell where WVS membership and activities began and ended'. Calder's later *Myth of the Blitz*, however, records WVS officers themselves despairing at the rigidity of the English class system:

We find over and over again that it is the really poor people who are willing to take evacuees and that the sort of bridge-playing set who live at such places as Chorley Wood are terribly difficult about it all.¹⁶

A more recent commentator concludes that 'although large numbers of working women joined [the WVS] . . . the organisation remained firmly in the hands of upper and middle class women', and 'it is impossible that the WVS did much to subvert existing class hierarchies'. Unlike its contemporaries, the Women's Institutes, and the Townswomen's Guilds, the WVS 'made no attempt to foster democratic participation'. Apart from disliking its autocratic and hierarchical nature, those other organisations were naturally jealous of the WVS' privileged position as the recipient of government funds to finance basic administrative expenses. Formally, the WVS may have been a non-partisan organisation – Reading herself is plausibly said to have been uninterested in party politics – but the 'leading roles played by prominent Tory women' influenced public perceptions of the organisation.¹⁷

WVS activity in Swindon only illuminates the question of class rather sketchily. My ARC club informant's description of her WVS 'rivals' as 'heartly women in pork pie hats', probably says more about her distaste for the frumpish uniform than about the people inside it. There is, however, plenty of evidence from elsewhere that US troops, however grateful they were for coffee and sandwiches at the Welcome Clubs, remained deeply suspicious of British class-ridden stand-offishness, despite the efforts of friendly commentators like Ed Murrow to convince America that the war was breaking down these barriers.

Early in the war the US journalist Ralph Ingersoll was in London, staying at the Dorchester – where he was never asked for his ration book – and reporting back to his readers across the Atlantic on

rationing, meals in hotels and air raids. His book, *Report on England* contains an unflattering vignette of a WVS unit at work:

Five or six women were loading up a trailer to go to the scene of the last night's bombing. They had to stock it with tea, sandwiches etc. I watched them for an hour. They were still running back and forth to the cellar for things they had forgotten. They reminded me of the housewives of a small village preparing a light refreshment for a charity bazaar. Two servants [sic] helping them felt the same way. "I have never been out of work before nor worked so hard" [one said] and went back to polishing a counter that did not need polishing.¹⁸

The same year, Ingersoll's compatriot, Negley Farson, with his illustrator Tom Purvis, produced *their* account of the London blitz. In a passage about voluntary services in general, Farson quotes the unflattering opinion of a fictional London ARP warden about the 'social lights' of Mayfair 'the women who seem to pre-empt inevitably these war-created auxiliary jobs; the kind of people who always think they are doing something for somebody, rather than *with* the people. They're the menace'.¹⁹

If it was difficult for the WVS to dispose of 'class', then race – or what in the 1940s was dubbed 'colour' – was even more problematical. Before the war few Britons outside the big seaports, had ever seen black people, except on film and then usually as musicians, servants or comic figures. The problems posed by the arrival of black US troops in Britain have been extensively covered by a number of writers. There was in the end no way that US government policy – that about ten per cent of their forces in Britain should be black – could be squared with British official reluctance to see any 'negro' servicemen at all in this country. Mass-Observation and other opinion polls found that a majority of Britons opposed racial discrimination in theory but there was a strong, if sporadic, history of racial violence in Britain, for example in seaports following the first world war. British Government *Instructions as to the advice which should be given to British Service Personnel* were austere: 'for a white woman to go about in the company of a Negro American is likely to lead to controversy and ill-feeling'. In fact, British authorities took their lead from the Americans: black and white US troops were kept in separate camps, encouraged to spend their off-duty hours in different villages and pubs. US officials, who were reluctant to see *any* marriages between GIs and British girls, almost always refused a proposed marriage involving a black soldier, and wanted the British authorities to publicise the fact that such marriages were illegal in nineteen out of the 48 states. The devices – concentrating black troops in seaports and other big cities, and alternating leave days for black and white – that were

adopted to fudge the issue are set out in David Reynold's *Rich Relations* (1995): the impact of these measures, and of segregation in the armed forces in general, is vividly illustrated in Studs Terkel's oral history collection, *The Good War* published in 1985.

When I asked interviewees in Swindon they confirmed, first, that pre-war there were virtually no 'men of colour' in the town. The only one firmly recalled was a painter and decorator, his skin tone emphasised by his pristine white overalls. On black GIs I was told by two female interviewees that:

There was a lot of colour prejudice in those days. And if they [unspecified] thought they were mixing with the girls it would have been worse than ever . . . there were quite a few black Americans [in Swindon] and I don't remember thinking of them as any different to the others [but] there would have been still quite a border line between them [girls] going out with black Americans.²⁰

Across the border, in rural Oxfordshire, an oral history project recorded local people as having been appalled that black soldiers had been trained to step into the gutter when passing 'white folk' in the streets. On the other hand white GIs could not understand why the British accepted blacks as equals.²¹

In Wiltshire, as elsewhere, a mythology of sexual relations between black and white quickly developed. One villager wrote to Swindon's local paper, the *Evening Advertiser*, complaining about girls who had spent the night at the local US camp and then used his front window as a make-up mirror – 'concealing dirt' – in the morning. Their real offence, however, was to associate with black Americans: 'Let all who are English and white people stamp out this disgrace'. A number of racially slanted cases from magistrates' courts across the country were prominently reported in the *Advertiser*, which reinforces a recent author's observation that racial identification in press reports repeatedly suggested that girls who associated with 'coloured Americans' were particularly immoral or especially degraded.²² The specific impact on Swindon's clubs for US servicemen is unclear. Theoretically ARC clubs were non-segregated, but in practice separate clubs were provided, as for example in Tewkesbury, an even smaller town than Swindon. Attempts by 'coloured' ARC officers to get this policy changed were rebuffed by the US military command; my informant could not remember any black troops using the Cromwell Street club where she worked.

Its wartime records suggest, at least by default, that the WVS too was happy enough to acquiesce in the policy of segregation. As David Reynolds carefully puts it, 'the kind of contact which the MoI sought to foster

through the Welcome Clubs scheme was not altogether applicable in the case of coloured soldiers'. One argument was that because they mostly worked on transport and construction projects, the black soldiers did not stay long enough in one place to benefit from the home visit programme. The WVS therefore offered to run 'additional or alternative' facilities where coloured troops were stationed, and three 'Silver Birch' clubs were set up in Birmingham, Bala and Penarth; for a white girl to be seen visiting one of those was unusual, daring or scandalous, depending on your point of view.

By the time of the Cold War, when the WVS was again providing welfare services for American airmen and their families, clubs were desegregated but things had changed little. On two Oxfordshire US bases a WVS visitor reported that 'there are a few coloured troops but I was told that they are all very hand-picked men and they were mingling quite normally with the white troops'. However

Black airmen were not excluded from the Norwich Anglo-American Services Club: Girls had no objection to dancing with the coloured men, but the white men resented it and sometimes troubles arose. . . . Since preventing lady visitors coming into the Club on Sunday afternoons there has been a considerable drop in the number of American coloured troops using [it].²³

'Them and us', food and sex

British authorities recognised that even white American servicemen would be different from British or Europeans, and there were some half million foreign allied troops in the country when the GIs arrived. The most obvious difference lay in the material standard of living. The sandwiches over which the WVS agonised were a trivial example of this; countless wartime memoirs, diaries and novels show that getting what they wanted to eat and drink was a continuing topic of conversation and concern among soldiers and civilians alike. Getting enough food simply to survive was not really the issue: the average British civilian almost certainly enjoyed a healthier diet during the war. For the ladies at the head of the WVS the search for food and making do with substitutes meant little more than a humorous anecdote:

nobody in his wildest moments could complain that we are hungry [but] I can assure you there is nothing that brings the war home more forcibly than to meet an elderly lady in a mink coat carrying a naked eel in one hand, a cauliflower in the other.²⁴

Dealing with logistical and catering problems was what the WVS was good at. But the Americans were fed well in their camps; they could buy extra rations at the PX – the US equivalent of the NAAFI – and ARC canteens had plentiful food for those on leave. By contrast the Ministry of Information had to break the news in 1943 that the Ministry of Food was unable to provide additional rations for the Welcome Clubs. Behind this material differences lay the cultural ones. Britons developed a rough and ready hierarchy of allied troops. Most of the national stereotypes involved sex; British troops felt 'sadly handicapped in the serviceman's traditional recreation – the pursuit of women'. GIs

brought with them a certain glamour as well as a steady supply of scarce commodities. Though widely commended for their courtesy and charm, they also soon established a reputation for being fast and free, which led many a mother to warn her daughter to steer clear of them.²⁵

A Mass-Observation survey in October 1940, put America at the bottom of the list of 'friendly' nations in terms of popularity, with the Czechs and Dutch at the top. Among British men, the percentage of 'unfavourable comment' was the same for the Americans as for Italians.²⁶ Women I interviewed in Swindon remember the arrival of the GIs in the town as being more than faintly exciting, a welcome and glamorous wartime interlude, and certainly not threatening. One reason for this sense of anticipation was the importance of the cinema in people's lives:

they gave the impression that they . . . were really something much better than our troops. Much more generous, come from better home backgrounds, but [of] course it was highly coloured because of the films; even at my age I'd been to the cinema and we'd seen American films, and . . . where you saw a house it was very wide, open plan . . . opinions of Americans were already coloured by the films. They looked to be better dressed than our servicemen. And generous, too . . . the American troops made quite an impact on the town. They were very friendly to everyone, from small children to the very elderly. They had sweets and gum for children. . . . And they would chat with the elderly; perhaps they were missing their family . . . or maybe they considered them quaint old English yokels.

But an older woman, already married with a young daughter in 1943, was dismissive:

we went down to watch the first consignment [of GIs] come in and, oh dear, never saw such a sloppy [lot], they didn't march they just

slouched along with these packs, and yet we used to see lots of our troops . . . the English and Scottish troops were often at the camp and they used to march through . . . such a contrast.²⁷

Although the surviving correspondence tends to dwell on the practicalities of food supply and cooking for the Welcome Clubs, the WVS also understood well enough that US troops' appetite was not for coffee and sandwiches alone: what they needed was 'nice girls' to take to dances which, along with the cinema, were the most popular wartime form of entertainment. Towards the end of the war, the National Council for Social Service, trying to forecast the post-war provision of holiday facilities, believed that many people would be happy enough with smartened up wartime hostels. But only if the occasional dance could be laid on so that guests might again enjoy

one of those slightly intoxicating experiences which are a by-product of a world at war, a human stock-pot whose miscellaneous contents – factory girl, villager, land girl, soldier, American, New Zealander – are gently stirred by the strains of the local dance band, possibly supplied by the R.A.F.²⁸

The perceived 'niceness' of dancing partners was difficult to disassociate from class. Girls were cast as officers' girls, sergeants' girls, and those for other ranks; or, more practically, as 'those that did and those that didn't'. Selecting girls was not readily amenable to directives from WVS HQ:

We are repeatedly asked to help to find young women to attend dances at [US] officers' clubs but have been reluctantly forced to refuse our help. It is our unfortunate experience that when girls are found they very often spend the whole evening without dancing and the view has been frequently expressed . . . that junior officers prefer to find their own partners.

But some WVS officers, at least, rated highly the role of chaperone:

The selection of the girls is made . . . with very great care. The WVS member who acts as chaperone, is a young, slim and attractive married woman. As each girl is called for from her home, office or factory, so she is checked in on an official list, which is later checked with the signatures after the girls sign in on the Base Visitors list, and checked again on departure. . . . Behaviour is firmly and kindly watched; the girls co-operate, for they know that passes will be withdrawn if behaviour does not reach the accepted high standard.²⁹

While concentrating on the niceness of the GIs' partners, the Swindon WVS managed to upset local men, home on leave from the British forces, who complained that the Welcome Club dances had put up prices and booked inferior bands. One soldier wrote to the local paper that the WVS had 'lowered the town's prestige considerably'.³⁰ But the WVS was far from alone in worrying about 'niceness'. Many of the young women in and around Swindon were strangers, having been drawn as munitions workers or land-girls; one remembers having difficulty persuading the farmer and his wife, with whom she lodged, to let her go to the 'Yankee dances' in Swindon:

we were allowed to go on the understanding that we wouldn't be late as [the farmer] would be waiting up for us in fatherly fashion . . . we would count each other back into the truck and it was always carried out with great precision.³¹

There was widespread disapproval of local girls who were thought to have over-stepped the mark with GIs. A folk lore built up all over Wiltshire; a Devizes man, reminiscing in the local paper 35 years later, said one of the 'camp followers' was well known as 'Haystack Annie'. One anecdote told by an interviewee exemplifies both envy of the Americans' material possessions and misgivings about their appropriateness as companions:

For instance, British troops had identity tags on a cord. Americans had theirs on a Metal beaded chain. So girls began wearing those chains as bracelets, an outward sign that they had been out with a GI, a status symbol . . . but I think a parent would have very mixed feelings if a daughter came home and it was obvious that she'd been out with Americans . . . proud in some way but, ah, dubious that American troops were to us foreign really.³²

Sexual and military rumour reinforced one another. The same interviewee referred to allegations that American artillery was believed to have fired on British infantry, now euphemistically dubbed 'friendly fire'. Two of the units supposedly involved, one American and one British, were then stationed near Swindon and 'got into the town . . . where they said they started to fight'. The knowledge that British troops thought Swindon girls were going out with these same Americans fanned the flames: 'I know when my [female] cousin used to say "darn Yanks", you know, "they did this", and then I've heard it so many times since'.³³

A male interviewee, like me a schoolboy in Swindon during the second world war, regrets what he is now inclined to equate with racial

prejudice against Americans both black and white. His female cousins, too, used to go out with GIs, impressed by their 'worldly personalities' and film-star looks, and thereby acquired a 'very bad name in the family':

anybody who went out with Yanks, they were termed to be Yankee-bashers or something like that . . . it was a derogatory term anyway. I had two lovely cousins . . . very attractive girls, and they were ostracised by the family because of their connections with the Americans. My father said the Americans gave away chewing gum and babies, and that was about the sort of image they had in our family. But . . . when you are young you're sort of biased, and there is animosity, and it's only bigotry on the face of it. But as you mature you realise that . . . the world is a small place and the Americans are really . . . a very open race, friendly . . . nice people.³⁴

Differences over what constituted an eatable sandwich, or how much a GI should consume if invited to visit a British family at home might, be put right relatively easily; perceived differences in the mating game were much more difficult to deal with. The American anthropologist Margaret Mead tried to rationalise differences between American and British in the shadowy world of sexual encounter. She explained to British readers the difference between an American 'date' and an evening spent with someone you expected to marry. 'Mothers in America,' she wrote, 'approve of this dating game and believe that their daughter's popularity will give her a better opportunity to make a "wise choice" when she does settle down'. And she concluded that people in Britain strongly disapproved of the man who plays 'fast and loose' with women, whereas in the US, it was more 'difficult' for a man to find a wife and a more robust approach was tolerated.³⁵

The GIs' 'robust approach' was noted in a village not far from Swindon which, by the end of 1944, also had its Welcome Club providing the usual menu of tea, coffee and cakes, along with competitions and sing songs round the piano. Recording their experiences, a year after the war ended, the Women's Institute remembered a 'slight hitch' having arisen because of Americans seeing the local girls home with 'too much vigour'; one GI confessed that he 'figured it out that a girl would be kind of insulted if you saw her home and did not offer to kiss her'. As David Reynolds puts it: 'GIs were widely regarded as not only more solicitous but more forward than British men'. Such forwardness was epitomised in a strip cartoon that appeared in the 'Shrivenham Post', the campus newspaper of the short-lived American University set up just outside Swindon in summer 1945. The first frame shows a nubile female and two GIs: 'Here comes one of 'em now. I'll show you my

technique', one GI says to the other. In the second frame he starts to chat up the girl, but only the words 'Hello baby – how' are visible beneath a 'CENSORED' sticker. In the third frame the 'forward' GI is conclusively demolished by a swing of the girl's handbag and the final frame has him ruefully saying 'I keep forgettin' that they unnerstan English here!'.³⁶ The WVS, like the British establishment as a whole, was largely silent on the social issues which underlay such puzzles. Swindon Borough Council appointed its first full-time social worker in October that year, to deal with 'growing social and moral problems . . . and . . . to safeguard the interests of illegitimate children'.³⁷

The risk to public health and morals was popularly attributed to a supposed class of 'Good time girls'. Sonya Rose's article shows that the fearful prospect of women 'hanging around' army camps across Britain was rife among churchgoers, various other organisations and the local newspapers from 1939. An official report of October 1943 spoke in terms of 'Good time girls . . . in search of excitement,' and 'young persons who have no moral background and who are out of control' – the very threat, no doubt, that prompted Mr Corkill's original letter to Swindon's town clerk, and which the Welcome Club, among others, was designed to thwart. Counterbalancing this, occasional letters to the press ridiculed the 'moral purity advocates' as old fashioned and the nightmare vision of moral decay as overblown. But with the arrival of US troops, especially Negroes, the 'good time girl' scenario was enhanced:

The specter [sic] of 'half caste' babies threatened to blur the racial lineaments of white British national identity and make the new black presence a permanent social problem.³⁸

Useful though these scares might have been when it came to selling newspapers, statistics put a different slant on things. There is no particular reason to think that 'immorality' increased in wartime to any great extent although illegitimacy certainly did. One important reason was that, as in peacetime, many children were conceived before wedlock but wartime conditions then made it less likely that the planned marriage could actually take place.³⁹ Uninformed by statistics, the public and press in and around Swindon enthusiastically took up the culpability of the 'good time girl'. Apart from the recurrent and salacious letters from the public, the local newspaper lavishly covered speeches on the subject in July 1943 by the Archbishop Garbett of York and Lady Ravensdale. The latter visited Swindon in her capacity as Vice President of the National Association of Girls Clubs and was 'strongly critical of girls who play "fast and loose"', asking 'What had happened to chastity and purity?'. Councillor Harrison of Swindon, speaking from the same platform,

implied untold horrors: 'You just go out into the streets and use your eyes and you will be surprised when you get hold of the facts'.⁴⁰ In practice, the number of Swindon girls who were able to flaunt a GI identity chain was probably balanced by those who, like the teenage volunteers at the ARC club, would only consent to go out with Americans in a group – and then had to be home by 11pm.⁴¹

Conclusions

It is easy, with hindsight, to make fun of the WVS activity, worrying about girls 'niceness', and whether the same number get into the truck at the end of the dance as arrived at the beginning. Unlike the contents of sandwiches or the best way to serve coffee, serious social issues – illegitimacy, venereal disease, racial prejudice – unsurprisingly get little mention in WVS histories. And, useful as Welcome Clubs and WVS dances were as entertainment for both troops and civilians, for the most part contacts between American troops and British girls were made informally, without the intervention of the WVS or other chaperones. As Jenny Hartley observes, a 'WVS woman was easy to ridicule, the archetype of the bossy female, beloved of cartoonists'; but she also points out we should not underestimate the hard work, skill and care that went into the typical WVS activity, including evacuating, clothing, feeding and salvaging the possessions of air-raid victims. An article celebrating the WVS' 60th anniversary in 1998 reminds us both of the diversity of wartime membership, and the range of activities undertaken, many of them unpleasant and dangerous; 241 members died on war duty.⁴² Tom Harrisson, founder of Mass-Observation, not a notably soft-hearted commentator, concluded that voluntary organisations in general were more successful in adapting quickly to wartime conditions and learning the lessons of the blitz than either central or local government. Among such organisations the WVS was 'outstanding' even though it aroused some resentment at the time because it appeared to concentrate on cups of tea 'with priority to uniformed personnel'.⁴³

The role of the WVS at the Welcome Club – serving food, entertaining, providing partners and chaperones for dances – could hardly seem more traditional. On the face of it the wartime roles of the WVS and similar organisations simply reinforced stereotypes – women in traditional roles, out of the economic mainstream, badly rewarded, not "progressive", not radical or politicised in any way. But against this at least one feminist historian has emphasised how the wartime importance of *preservation* – of food, health, life itself – and the vital contribution of

women to this aspect of economic warfare, enhanced their status and sharpened the momentum for change.⁴⁴ On the whole it seems more sensible to judge the WVS activities against what seemed important at the time. The organisation did its best to get the logistics right, making use of available resources, including the meagre amount of money released by a Government which was at one and the same time shifting towards state interference in welfare and trying to keep the lid on inflation. The WVS could exploit the pool of labour deriving from middle-class ideas of 'service to the community'. Welcome Clubs in Swindon and elsewhere provided the entertainment, notably dances with minimal formality, which had been a success story of the 1930s.

Lady Reading and her peers were trying – though I doubt if they saw it like this – to find ways of dealing with sex in wartime, arguably less efficiently but certainly more humanely than, say, the system of 'comfort women' organised by the Japanese military in the territories they occupied. The WVS and their Welcome Clubs represent no greater muddle-headedness than, say, the British military authorities, as described by Cate Haste, forever wavering over what to do about brothels in Europe or the Middle East.⁴⁵ WVS officers' idea of how to police meetings between GIs and Swindon girls may have derived from a folk memory of Edwardian chaperones, but all concerned, including Councillor Harrison and the WVS volunteers themselves, probably got through the war that little bit better with the Welcome Club than without it. One final quotation, from a collection of Swindonians' oral testimony, brings together several themes – obsession with food, antipathy to overseas troops, lack of enthusiasm for the 'good time' – and perhaps indicates that the WVS officers, middle-aged, middle-class and muddle-headed though they may have been, were not entirely out of step with the preferences of Swindon girls:

Everyone wanted to go to the dances held at Down Ampney by the Canadian Air Force. This was not because of the company but the delicious creamy cakes. It was a type of sponge covered with a white, soft icing. One evening when we were waiting for transport ... an officer approached us and said could we change our minds and go to Ogbourne ... his men were paratroopers and were going to jump tomorrow ... maybe this was their last night on earth. As our transport had not arrived we decided to accept his offer. 'His men' were enormous specimens. They also had enormous feet. After a while they said they were going to turn out all the lights. At this we protested vigorously and some of us went home on the service bus.⁴⁶

Notes

1. W[iltshire] C[ounty] R[ecord] Office], G24/225/4.
2. Mol's financial involvement may seem odd; the origins of the WVS lay with the Home Office. The Mol, however, had overall responsibility for relations between US troops and British civilians. David Reynolds, in *Rich Relations* (1995) sees Mol's victory in this Whitehall turf war as a win for Mol's aggressive minister, Brendan Bracken, over War Office colleagues. Another possibility is that Mol had budget to spare at that time.
3. The extent to which the town clerk involved himself in details of this and other 'home front' activity is amply illustrated in archives. After the war Murray-John headed the drive to attract new industry and expand Swindon.
4. W[omen's] R[oyal] V[oluntary] S[ervice Archives], SW 15. I am indebted to Ms Rowena Howse, WRVS archivist, for access to selected papers of the 1940s and 1950s.
5. WRVS. SW, 15 and 201. WCRO. G24/225/4.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Interview with Jean Allen, Swindon, June 1999; WRVS. SW, 15. 'Red and Green' coffee was produced for the WVS by R Twining & Co Ltd who also supplied the British Army, YMCA canteens and the British Red Cross – for prisoner of war parcels. I am grateful to Mr Samuel Twining for pointing me in the direction of his father's book *The House of Twining* (1956) to confirm all this although, sadly, the company seems to have no packaging or other material from the period. Lady Reading wrote: 'When Twining's send a man to make coffee for my [WVS] Breakfast Party, I always have so many compliments on [it]. Personally I cannot see any difference in the taste, but the Americans like it'.
8. Reynolds, *op.cit.*, pp.154–5.
9. The Personal Service League had been set up in 1932 by Reading and others who later headed the WVS. It provided clothes, shoes and blankets for unemployed men.
10. Reynolds, *op.cit.*, p.159.
11. Telephone conversation with Jean Cole, Swindon, 29 April 2001. Jean and a teenage friend volunteered to work at the canteen because 'there was nothing else to do in Swindon on Sunday evenings'.
12. Reading to Richard Allen, Washington, 19 April 1944, WRVS. D3/40. On 19 August 1943 a regional officer of the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts wrote to his Headquarters complaining that the ARC paid its typists so much that British government offices and agencies could not recruit local staff, Victoria & Albert Museum Archive, EL/3/37.
13. Correspondence between Reading and Norman Davis, American Red Cross, 12 August and 10 September 1942, WRVS. D3/40. Reynolds, *op.cit.*, p.160.
14. A Calder, *The People's War* (1969), p.194.
15. C Graves, *Women in Green* (1948), pp.3–4, 7.
16. Calder, *op.cit.*, pp.1945. A Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (1991), p.62.

17. J Hinton 'Voluntarism and the welfare/warfare state; the WVS in the 1940s', *20th Century British History*, 9, 2 (1998), pp.277-305.
18. R Ingersoll, *Report on England* (1941), p.239.
19. N Farson, *Bomber's Moon* (1941), p.142.
20. Interviews, Jean Allen, Joyce Murgatroyd, Swindon, June 1999.
21. Oxfordshire County Records Oral History Project tape 32, quoted M Graham, *Oxfordshire at War* (Stroud, 1994), p.71.
22. *Evening Advertiser*, 31 May 1944. Throughout the war the *Advertiser* ran its children's column, edited by 'Auntie Joy', under the title 'Nignogs' Corner'; S Rose, 'Sex, citizenship and the nation in World War II Britain', *American History Review*, 103, 4 (1998), pp. 1174-6.
23. Reynolds, *op.cit.*, pp.219-23, 316. J Cole, interview, 29 April 2001. WRVS. SW, 15, 11 December 1950 and April-June 1955. WRVS. records do not say why the name 'Silver Birch' was chosen; Reynolds and other authors are silent on the point.
24. Mrs Elsa Dunbar, Head WVS Overseas Department, to David Jaques, ARC, 26 January 1943, WRVS. D3/40.
25. Haste, *Rules of Desire* (1992), p.124.
26. M-O 1943, quoted Reynolds, *op.cit.*, pp.41, 266-7.
27. Interviews with Jean Allen, Joan Jefferies, Swindon, 19 June 1999. The 'camp' referred to was at Chiseldon, a couple of miles from Swindon. Reynolds, *op.cit.*, p.327, quotes a British soldier on American troops in Norwich: 'They are slovenly, untidy and quite undisciplined! They can't march or drill and to see them salute would make a cat laugh!'
28. National Council for Social Service, *Holidays* (1945), p.38. In Rhodesia, Doris Lessing wrote, 'It is not too much to say that while some were dying for freedom, others were dancing for it'. D Lessing, 'The Black Madonna', in A Boston (ed.), *Wave Me Goodbye* (1988).
29. Avice Wilson, Imperial War Museum Memoirs, quoted Reynolds, *op.cit.*, p.277. WRVS. SW, 15. In the 1990s a Ruskin College student entitled her MA thesis, based on oral testimony of women now in their 60s and 70s, 'Nice Girls Don't Do That'.
30. *Evening Advertiser*, 13 October 1944.
31. J Gardiner, *Over Here* (1992), p.131. The influx of industrial and agricultural workers to the area, and the consequent pressure on accommodation, was highlighted by Swindon being the first area to be nominated under the Lodgings Restrictions Order (1941) whereby householders could not let rooms without consulting the local authority.
32. *Evening Advertiser*, 8 February and 31 May 1944, and 6 September 1979. Jean Allen interview 19 June 1999.
33. *Ibid.*
34. Interview with Jack Hayward, Swindon, 16 October 1999.
35. M Mead, *The American Troops and the British Community* (1944/5), pp.6-10.
36. Graham, *op.cit.*, p.73; Reynolds, *op.cit.*, p.265. *Shrivenham Post*, 22 August 1945.
37. S Ferguson and H Fitzgerald, *Studies in the Social Services* (1954), p.126. *Evening Advertiser*, 27 October 1943: a week later the editor hoped the

appointment would lead to a 'considerable improvement in moral conditions in the town'.

38. Rose, *op.cit.*, p.1157.
39. Reynolds, *op.cit.*, pp.273-7.
40. *Evening Advertiser*, 1 July 1943.
41. Interview, J Cole 29 April 2001.
42. J Hartley (ed.), *Hearts Undefeated* (1994), p.135. L Westwood, 'More than tea and sympathy', *History Today*, 48, 6 (1998), pp 3-5.
43. T Harrison, *Living Through the Blitz* (Harmondsworth, 1978), pp.161, 293.
44. M Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism* (1997), p.100.
45. Haste, *op.cit.*, *passim*.
46. Mrs E Jenkins, 'A telephonist in wartime', in M Jones (ed.), *Fifty Years On: Writing from the Second World War by Residents of the Borough of Thamesdown* (Swindon, 1990), pp.63-4.