Children's working experiences in the First World War

Children in St Albans (At the start of the war, one and a half million children were evacuated from big cities and 6,000 of them came to St Albans. The children arrived in St Albans from London by train) – and throughout the country – made a huge and largely unrecognised contribution on the home front in 1914-1918. They constituted a mini army, mobilised to support the war effort – at home, in the classroom, on farms and in factories.

By the government's own estimate, some 600,000 children were put prematurely to work in this period in addition to an unknown number of 'little mothers' who missed school to look after siblings.

Compulsory education for all children in this country was still quite a new concept in 1914. It was introduced for 5 to 10 year-olds in 1880 and was made free to all in 1891. Until then parents were expected to contribute to the cost, if they could afford it. (...)

In addition, those children actually attending school full-time were regularly employed to work before and after the school day. It seems that there was little control over this until by-laws were introduced in St Albans in late 1917.

One wonders how many hours children worked and at what age as the new by-laws prohibited the employment of children under 10 and restricted the number of hours they could be employed to four and a half hours a day in winter and five and a half in summer.

It appears that few girls were exempted from school, tending to leave the moment they turned 14. And there were expanding work opportunities for them in this period, including at E. Day & Co's hat factory in Marlborough Road**.** Days had set up a production line employing mainly women and girls to turn out military sun helmets.

Source :https://everydaylivesinwar.herts.ac.uk/2017/10/childrens-working-experiences-in-the-first-world-war/

The Boy Scouts & Girl Guides

In their spare time many children were engaged in active support of the war effort. The Boy Scouts in particular wore their uniform with pride and became increasingly involved in forming volunteer groups to act as messengers, coastguard lookouts and signallers. Service to the nation was not confined to boys and the Girl Guides also offered opportunities to their members to earn merit badges for their war-related efforts. In *Girl Guide Badges and How to Win Them*, alongside the Air Mechanics, Ambulance and Rifle Shot badges was a War Service award which could be achieved through undertaking at least one hundred hours volunteer work in a hospital or on an allotment. In addition, the Girl Guides offered the Nurse Cavell Badge for exceptional conduct: 'either special pluck in saving life, self-sacrifice in work for others, endurance of suffering, or calmness in danger.' Outside of these organisations many more children contributed to the war effort, a Pathé newsreel from 1917 entitled 'Even Children Help' shows a group of serious eleven and twelve year olds from Dunstable wielding hoes and shovels and while not in strict military formation, they appear to be an

organised unit and there is a military quality to the way in which they bear their garden implements on their shoulders, reminiscent of soldiers and their rifles. Consciously or unconsciously, the children were not only serving the nation through their digging and hoeing but echoing the military service of the older generation.

Loss & Sacrifice

The war reached into children's lives through a web of other associations. The stories of sacrifice permeated the literature they read, the films they saw, the advertising in their comics and the excursions they made. In 1915, the V & A Museum (Victoria and Albert) in Kensington decided that more needed to be done to entertain children during the war, and so at Christmas it set aside a room for a special exhibition. Throughout the school holidays, children came to visit an area that had been designed specifically for them – a new concept in the history of such institutions. It contained 'various subjects dealing with, or connected with, war and fighting', including models of Cromwell's soldiers and objects from the Napoleonic Wars, which were aimed at boy visitors while the girls were offered a display of costumes from the past and an array of dolls. A wider audience was reached through comics such as *Chums*, a boys' magazine whose wartime issues were packed with stories that told of the active role of schoolboys in the conflict whether through the detection of German spies in their locality or by working directly for the war effort in the harvest. But, whatever the reach of comics, books, museums, youth associations or school, the most significant way in which the war came home for children was through absence: the gaps that were left in their families as fathers, brothers and uncles were called up into military service. Children became prolific letter writers as well as readers and helped forge the connections between home and battle fronts that sustained the men, and of course for many, the war's legacy would be experienced in the years after the Armistice in the void created by the loss of relatives and the long-lasting physical or mental damage suffered by the veterans and their families.

Source : https://everydaylivesinwar.herts.ac.uk/childrens-lives/