Femininity and Women’s Sexuality in Britain During World War II

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Islands At War

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As World War II disturbed the patterns of daily life in Britain, social expectations about women’s sexualities and women’s performance of gender changed. The exigencies of total war demanded the conscription of women and civilian participation, and women became more visible as workers outside of the home. Simultaneously, the conscription of fathers and husbands left women largely independent in their own homes. These changes could be interpreted as harbingers of greater social freedom for women, and indeed wartime experiences were often liberating to women. As one Mass Observation report recorded in 1942, “In normal times, most major decisions of personal conduct are determined largely by a husband or father or fiance. […] The war is changing that situation, and is forcing women to notice more closely the wider implications of their environment outside the home and the corner shop.”

Yet the British public was uneasy with these changes, and social and legal backlash began immediately. Though the war disrupted daily routines throughout Britain, women were expected to remain as feminine as possible to help the social landscape appear “normal.” Sexual activity outside of marriage was harshly punished for women while tacitly allowed for men. Lesbians who sought war work or military positions as an alternative to marriage were expected to remain strictly closeted. Women were expected to not have too much fun during the war—enjoying their new independence and freedom was seen as “unpatriotic and even traitorous behavior.” This backlash against women’s independence was a common thread through all the years of WWII and continued into peacetime and the conservative 1950s.

Women’s war work was contextualized during the war primarily through the lens of marriage and domestic responsibility towards men. Prewar, working-class women routinely worked as domestic workers, pieceworkers, and factory employees in order to supplement their

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1 Mass Observation Archive, The Library, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton, FR 1238, 1 May 1942, Appeals to Women, as quoted in Goodman, Women, Sexuality and War, 21-22.
husbands’ income. Wartime necessity led to the widespread employment of middle- and upper-class married women for the first time.

Starting in May 1941, all eighteen-year-old girls were required to register for conscription, just like their male counterparts. Married women and women “responsible for a household containing a father, husband or brother” were exempt from conscription but were encouraged to volunteer; women who cared for female relatives were not exempt. Even war widows were conscripted a short time after their husbands’ deaths. The British government believed that single women could be substituted for men who had been called up for military service, but married women’s primary responsibility was to domestic work. This assumption was echoed by the 1942 Beveridge report, which assumed “women’s economic dependence on a male head of the family.”

Though women flooded into the workplace, they were not paid commensurate to men since it was assumed that women were not their families’ main breadwinners. Even skilled women were not paid as well as men; wages for women in engineering had not changed since WWI (about 1 pound a week). Companies were often loathe to hire women and did so only when they had to. Elaine Burton, a journalist who wrote a 1941 book about women’s employment, asserted that women over thirty had a difficult time finding any jobs at all, let alone well-paid ones. Well-paid jobs in factories were reserved for men in most cases, with women filling the gaps with clerical work or non-physical inspection jobs. These jobs were viewed as essentially temporary: a female secretary wrote that “clerical work is a dead-end job for all

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women who have no desire to get married.”

Though Burton wrote that “women are ready for responsibility,” most employers did not agree. Even the government declined to place many women in positions of responsibility. Although the Central Register nominally provided workers for administrative vacancies based on qualifications and regardless of sex, departments commonly earmarked jobs for male candidates.

Yet many women longed for skilled jobs that could continue into peacetime. Nella Last’s teenage neighbor declared that she would take courses to help snag a lasting job for financial independence: “No potty blind-alley jobs for me, where I’ll either be out of work after the war, or else have to get married.”

Prejudice that women were better at “finer” work funneled women into “unskilled” low-paying jobs, but also presented opportunity in some cases. The all-woman 93rd Searchlight Regiment was given searchlights and radar to track enemy planes—the radar supposedly better suited to women’s manual dexterity.

Elaine Burton mentioned that “adjustment work, such as painting and varnishing of shells and the making of fuses” usually went to women, who were perceived to be more “accurate” with such finely detailed work.

Despite the essential nature of women’s war work, women were expected to pull a “double shift” and take care of the household as well as their work outside of the home. Elaine Burton complained eloquently about this dilemma: “What are you to do if you leave at 8.30 a.m. each day before the shops open and return when they are closed or when practically everything has been sold? This is the one point on which I have always envied the men. It is not expected

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12 Last, *Nella Last’s War*, 173.
that they shall be troubled with such mundane trifles!” Nella Last wrote in 1942 that she and her volunteering friends had gotten into a “slap happy way of ‘doing the bits that showed most’” with housework. In 1940, the Red Cross established a “Helpless Husbands Club,” offering laundry, mending, and cooking services for men whose wives had been conscripted. As far as the Red Cross was concerned, the biggest problem of the “second shift” was the inconvenience it visited upon men who could not or would not take over the housework. Nella Last was troubled by the number of young women postponing marriage until peacetime, attributing it to war work which gave young women “a taste of freedom from home drudgery.”

The poor conditions under which women worked in factories sometimes had a politicizing effect. One factory worker said that “I had developed my feminist consciousness through my experience in the factory, which I would never have had without the war.” Nella Last’s newfound sense of independence, which she gained from volunteering leadership in the W.V.S., led her to realize that “the years when I had to sit quiet and always do everything [my husband] liked, and never the things he did not, were slavery years of mind and body.” Clearly war work did change women’s perceptions of themselves, of their abilities, and of their place within the family, despite pressure to remain focused on the domestic sphere even when working outside of the home.

Pre-war, companies routinely fired female workers who got married while employed; during the war, women were no longer fired after marriage, due to labor shortages. Factories were in such dire straits that women were even pressured to work even while pregnant, for up to

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16 Last, Nella Last’s War, 221.
17 Goodman, Women, Sexuality and War, 44.
18 Last, Nella Last’s War, 190.
20 Last, Nella Last’s War, 160.
21 Goodman, Women, Sexuality and War, 30.
8 months in some cases.\textsuperscript{22} When peace resumed and men returned to the domestic labor force, many companies resumed the practice of laying off married or engaged women.\textsuperscript{23} Many women who had been employed full-time focused on the home again after peacetime, taking up only “part-time and temporary” work.\textsuperscript{24} The changes that war work wrought on individual women may have lasted into peacetime, but on a large social scale, Britain returned to prewar domestic standards.

Women were expected to maintain a feminine appearance throughout the war. Although clothing rationing and cosmetics shortages discouraged women from being “fashionable,” they were nonetheless urged to stay well-groomed and pretty to provide a visual morale boost to British men who needed a symbol of “something to fight for.” In the face of textile shortages, “utilitarian clothes or a uniform and flat shoes” became the norm, but women were expected to look “smart” even in government-sanctioned utility clothing.\textsuperscript{25} Many women went to extraordinary lengths to maintain a good appearance. Although cosmetics were rare and exorbitantly expensive due to shortages, the black market flooded with stolen or illicitly manufactured makeup.\textsuperscript{26} Despite the poor quality of the products, women continued to use cosmetics. One woman described wartime lipstick as “like dry chalk to put on though it looked like garish enamel or grease-paint. It had a bitter taste and we waited for it to dry with our mouths open!”\textsuperscript{27} The stress of war caused many women’s hair to go prematurely grey, leading to an increase in the use of dyes and cover-ups.\textsuperscript{28} Women’s Own magazine advised women to fill their dressing-gown pockets with makeup in order to refresh their faces during overnight stays in

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\textsuperscript{22} Goodman, Women, Sexuality and War, 35. \\
\textsuperscript{23} Goodman, Women, Sexuality and War, 31. \\
\textsuperscript{24} Sheridan, “Ambivalent Memories,” 34. \\
\textsuperscript{25} Goodman, Women, Sexuality and War, 115. \\
\textsuperscript{26} Waller, London 1945, 160. \\
\textsuperscript{27} Minns, Bombers and Mash, 157. \\
\textsuperscript{28} Waller, London 1945, 411.
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air raid shelters.\textsuperscript{29} Clearly, no matter the exigencies of war, British women had a social and patriotic duty to look attractive even while literally diving for safety from bombs.

Women were also expected to dress well and “decently,” regardless of strict clothing rationing that had many women literally dressed in rags by the end of the war. The rich could circumvent the austerity measures somewhat, but less wealthy women did without. Nella Last wrote that by mid-1940, it was “easy to recognise the haves and have-nots […] by the wearing of silk stockings and the frequent trips to the hairdresser’s.”\textsuperscript{30} Women needed to balance the need to look smart with patriotic compliance with rationing. While buying new utilitarian clothes was not always unpatriotic—garments did eventually wear out, regardless of constant mending—extravagant purchases like a new wedding dress were certainly frowned upon.\textsuperscript{31} Repurposing or lending formal garments became the norm. One woman wrote proudly, “My wedding dress went up the aisle five times.”\textsuperscript{32}

The pressure of patriotic femininity sometimes intersected with war employment in contradictory ways. Women workers often sneakily used bathroom breaks or meal times to fix hair or makeup in anticipation of a night out, and some factory managers removed mirrors from company lavatories to discourage this practice.\textsuperscript{33} At other factories, female employees had to ask permission from a male supervisor before using the lavatory to discourage shirking work in favor of doing one’s hair.\textsuperscript{34} These policies demonstrate that the undeniable need for wartime labor sometimes superseded the pressure to perform the gendered labor of appearance. This tension between the patriotic feminine ideal and the workaday reality was indirectly acknowledged by

\textsuperscript{29} Goodman, \textit{Women, Sexuality and War}, 119.
\textsuperscript{30} Last, \textit{Nella Last’s War}, 57.
\textsuperscript{31} Maureen Waller, \textit{London 1945}, 228.
\textsuperscript{33} Philomena Goodman, \textit{Women, Sexuality and War}, 51.
\textsuperscript{34} Philomena Goodman, \textit{Women, Sexuality and War}, 47.
the government. The Ministry of Information deemed actual women workers too uninspiring for the purposes of propaganda and hired “glamorous young women dressed as war workers” to appear in films instead.\footnote{Philomena Goodman, \textit{Women, Sexuality and War}, 117.}

In contrast, other war propaganda showcased what might be called “unpatriotic” femininity—insidiously glamorous woman spies, the opposite of the ideal practically dressed, wholesome British women. One poster featured a woman surrounded by officers, wearing full makeup, a jeweled necklace, and a diaphanously rendered evening gown featuring prominently shaded breasts. The caption read: “Keep mum—she’s not so dumb! Careless talk costs lives.”\footnote{Minns, \textit{Bombers and Mash}, 165.}

This type of propaganda set up a clear dichotomy. Patriotic femininity was quintessentially British: determined but cheerful, hard-working but effortlessly pretty. Unpatriotic femininity was foreign, treacherous, luxurious, and promiscuous.

Some wartime depictions of women occupied a grey area between the two femininities. Men’s morale was to be kept up not just by chaste images of pretty women but by more explicit and sexually objectifying images. During the war, the \textit{Daily Mirror} ran a popular daily cartoon strip featuring a young and busty woman named Jane, who “comically” lost her clothes in each strip, often with fully dressed men in military uniforms leering in the background.\footnote{Goodman, \textit{Women, Sexuality and War}, 112.} When the war ended, Jane was depicted fully nude as a celebratory gesture.\footnote{Goodman, \textit{Women, Sexuality and War}, 113.}

The production and availability of pornography increased during the war.\footnote{Goodman, \textit{Women, Sexuality and War}, 111.} Mass Observation reported on a proliferation of “more harmless types of pornography” such as pinups and attributed this trend to “soldiers on leave and nerves on edge.”\footnote{M-OA: FR 64, ‘US’ no 9, 29 March 1940, as quoted in Goodman, \textit{Women, Sexuality and War}, 111.} Pornography was
particularly widely distributed among men in the military—sometimes even by the military itself. Female pinups were employed “to teach camouflage techniques and map reading to new recruits.” Images of women were gridded and treated as analogous to inert land, to be conquered and captured. No such exercise was offered to military women. In fact, though male enlistees could openly display female pin-ups in their barracks, on their equipment, and in their lockers, female enlistees were forbidden even to post up images of clothed male movie stars.

Aside from this double standard of objectification, women in the military were subject to standards of patriotic femininity even more strictly than civilian women in some cases. Female uniforms were different from those of their male colleagues and usually featured skirts (rather than trousers, which civilian women had begun to wear with increasing frequency); uniforms most often did not include pockets in the skirts, for fear of masculinizing the silhouette. In an attempt to make conscription sound appealing, Elaine Burton carefully described the uniforms of military branches which accepted women, saying for example that the W.R.N.S uniform was a smart “navy blue coat and skirt.”

The Markham Report of 1942 stressed that “the auxiliaries of today are the wives and mothers of the future and […] no one desires to apply a wholesale hardening process to the young women who are serving their country effectively and well.” When women seemed too militaristic or masculine, the public reaction was unfavorable. Critics of women’s conscription complained that “it is an utter farce to drill women in this military fashion, and induces ridicule. A brass band is not a necessity.” As a veteran later reminisced, women in the military “had to

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45 Report of the Committee on Amenities and Welfare Conditions in the Three Women’s Services, HMSO 1942 (Cmd 6384) otherwise known as the Markham report, 5, as quoted in Sheridan, “Ambivalent Memories,” 38.
work like troopers, yet try to look like ladies.” Government propaganda emphasized the femininity of women in the military. One celebratory pamphlet about the W.A.A.F. stated:

Neither a war nor a uniform nor an era of emancipation has destroyed their charm. They still have an eye for a young man, they still demand time to dance, to knit, to sew, to curl their hair and go courting. The recent exhibition of WAAF handicrafts and arts in London was a very revealing thing. Its hundreds of paintings, embroideries and toys, its craft in silk and satin, were more than the result of a sideline. They showed better than any words how intensively, among all the grease and oil and masculinility and mechanisation of modern war, a woman’s army had struggled to cherish its feminine identity.

While the government tried to enforce chaste femininity in military women, the public was suspicious of the morals of any woman in uniform. Independent from their families and often posted far from home, women in the military were popularly seen as “loose.” The stigma against women in uniform was so great that some W.A.A.F. women avoided wearing their uniforms in public or concealed hatpins in their pockets to fend off sexual assault by both civilian and military men. Elaine Burton expressed a common view of A.T.S. workers with delicate innuendo: “The land girl had hours of time on her hands. Some farmers viewed these town workers with horror and forbade any mixing with the male hands. The result was a worse problem than ever in some areas.”

Even the government sometimes accepted and promoted this view. One MP described a Service Women’s Camp as being populated by “amateur prostitutes” and expressed his wish to give these enlisted women a “jolly good slapping.” These assertions did not go unchallenged, however. The Times reported in 1941 that a female MP in the House of Commons attempted to

47 Dorothy Calvert, from Bull, Battle-Dress, Lanyard & Lipstick (Bognor Regis: New Horizon, 1978), 120, as quoted in Goodman, Women, Sexuality and War, 97.
48 The WAAF in Action (London: A. & C. Black, 1944), 11, as quoted in Hamer, Britannia’s Glory, 140.
49 Goodman, Women, Sexuality and War, 93-94.
50 Burton, What of the Women, 57.
51 Goodman, Women, Sexuality and War, 92.
defend the A.T.S. from “unfounded rumors” of widespread pregnancy and venereal disease, declaring that “the number of cases was so infinitesimal as to be unbelievable.”^52

However, venereal disease and extramarital childbirth were growing trends in the general British population. Illegitimate births doubled from 1940 to 1945, and reported rates of venereal disease shot up almost as much; given that venereal disease was generally underreported, Edith Summerskill estimated that the number of Britons with sexually transmitted infections during the war may have been “higher than the number of Blitz casualties.”^53 The question of why venereal disease was so widespread may be partially answered by public ignorance. A 1942 Mass Observation report found that one-fifth of surveyed women and almost one-tenth of surveyed men had no knowledge of sexually transmitted infections whatsoever.^54 These alarming numbers posed a threat to the British population, which needed to be as healthy as possible to survive total war conditions.

In response, the government launched a propaganda campaign against the spread of venereal disease and urged people who suspected they might be infected to seek treatment as soon as possible. Conscripted women were subject to inspections for venereal disease, conducted monthly by male doctors, an experience many women found humiliating.^55 Moreover, condom manufacturers were given special reserves of rubber to ensure the flow of prophylactics even during rubber shortages resulting from the Japanese occupation of Malay.^56

Rates of venereal disease could be explained not only by ignorance but by the greater social freedom that women enjoyed during the war. The blackout in particular allowed women to engage in extramarital sex virtually in public. A policeman told Mass Observation that “closely-
pressed little groups” of couples would stand in shop doors in the dark, “having intercourse in this way on the fringe of passing crowds, screened by another couple who were waiting to perform the same adventure.”57 Other public places such as parks were equally rife with sexual activity. Even inside the home, opportunities for extramarital sex presented themselves. Women forced to billet servicemen sometimes engaged in affairs with these new occupants.58 Nella Last’s young housekeeper explained, that when it came to wartime sex, “it’s as if people don’t think it’s wrong anymore.”59

The presence of foreign men during the war also encouraged extramarital sex. As the British population mixed with foreign Allied troops, venereal disease was passed back and forth between the two groups. Fortunately, the US Army fortunately provided condoms and VD treatment to GIs for free, which protected British women somewhat from pregnancy and venereal disease.60

Yet socializing with GIs was a source of stigma for British women. British men resented the Americans’ higher salaries and access to goods such as silk stockings which attracted luxury-starved British women. Nella Last wrote in her Mass Observation diary that teenage girls would hang around the canteen in which Last worked, hoping to catch an American’s eye.61 Women who consorted with GIs were known pejoratively as “Yank bashers.”62 While some British girls were attracted to the flirtiness and humor of the American soldiers, many took flirting as a serious declaration of love when GIs viewed themselves as simply having a good time.63 One

57 M-OA: FR 64, US, no 9, 29 March 1940, as quoted in Goodman, Women, Sexuality and War, 146.
58 Goodman, Women, Sexuality and War, 139.
59 Last, Nella Last’s War, 153.
60 Long, From Britain With Love, 16.
61 Last, Nella Last’s War, 229.
62 Goodman, Women, Sexuality and War, 132.
63 Long, From Britain With Love, 15.
woman later remarked, “You danced with [GIs] but you knew what kind of reputation you would get if you went out with Americans.”

American privates earned almost over seven times more than British privates, so GIs never had a shortage of dates with British women who appreciated the steady flow of cash, nylon stockings, and cigarettes that American soldiers could provide. British men viewed this trend with anxiety. “Lord Haw-Haw” preyed on this trepidation by declaring that British women would soon be overcome by American suitors and dispense with British men altogether. This seemed to be confirmed by the great numbers of British women who married GIs during or immediately after the war.

Marriage to Americans was not the only threat to British women’s virtue, however. Extramarital childbearing was even more stigmatized if the father was American. One well publicized case involved an American soldier who posthumously was found to be a polygamist with multiple children by both of his unsuspecting wives. The U.S. Army didn’t make marrying a British woman easy for GIs; no less than 9 forms were required in triplicate for a GI to request marriage overseas, including a written recommendation of the fiancée from a Commanding Officer or chaplain. The Army also flatly denied any request by a black GI to marry a white woman. Therefore, many British women bore GIs’ children out of wedlock. Overall, the number of babies born to British women and fathered by GIs during the war approached 20,000. Unmarried women were often forced to give up their children for financial reasons, as the US Army rendered it virtually impossible for a British woman to demand child

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64 Oral Evidence [R5:7], Interviewed 16 December 1991, Born 1923, as quoted in Goodman, Women, Sexuality and War, 135.
65 Goodman, Women, Sexuality and War, 129.
66 Goodman, Women, Sexuality and War, 128.
67 Long, From Britain With Love, 22.
68 Long, From Britain With Love, 21.
69 Long, From Britain With Love, 18.
70 Long, From Britain With Love, 17.
support from a reluctant GI. Yet prospective British adoptive parents were leery of any baby without pure British parentage, so many of these children were ultimately raised in orphanages.

GIs were far from the only ones fathering children on British women outside of marriage. During the war, the rate of extramarital childbearing exploded. The disturbance of everyday life, combined with huge numbers of women unsupervised by fathers or husbands, contributed to this trend. Nella Last noted that extramarital childbearing was so common that women registering for conscription were asked if they were married and then if they had children: “I wonder how often girls say ‘Yes’” to the second question, she wrote. Single women were not the only ones exploring this newfound freedom. Advice columnists or “agony aunts” frequently received letters from married women who had extramarital affairs during the war—though the advice given was invariably not to inform the husband so as not to damage his morale. This underscored the prime objective of British women’s sexuality and femininity during the war: to keep up male British morale at all costs.

Extramarital sex and childbearing was harshly punished with both social ostracism and more serious penalties. In 1940, Nella Last wrote about a mother sent her pregnant unwed daughter “away to her Aunt’s in the country” to bear the child in seclusion and hopefully avoid ruining her reputation in town. In another entry, Last mourned a young woman who coped so poorly with the stress of being an unmarried mother that she lost interest in her child and subsequently died of tuberculosis. These cases exemplified the social penalties of extramarital sex. More tangibly, the Army could actually disallow a serviceman’s wife’s allowance, without

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71 Long, From Britain With Love, 17.
72 Waller, London 1945, 398.
73 Waller, London 1945, 404.
7475 Last, Nella Last’s War, 136.
75 Goodman, Women, Sexuality and War, 124.
76 Last, Nella Last’s War, 82.
77 Last, Nella Last’s War, 114.
consent of her husband, if she were involved in “serious misbehavior” such as adultery.\textsuperscript{78} Servicemen divorced with such frequency during the war that the Army and R.A.F. established an aid group to help male soldiers afford the legal costs of divorce.\textsuperscript{79} No such group existed to aid women who wanted to divorce their husbands. Clearly, women were ostracized for violating sexual norms as they had been before the war, but doubly ostracized during the war if their sex lives could be seen as “unpatriotic.”

While the British public struggled with obvious evidence of unsanctioned sexuality—disease and pregnancy—awareness of less obvious non-normative sexuality grew as well. Although homosexuality was still illegal in Britain, lesbians began to gain a small amount of visibility, due in no small part to increased opportunities for financial independence from men during the war. Widespread employment for women helped to foster a lesbian community comprised of single women, rather than married women as was common before the war. With economic independence and a life outside the family sphere, a lesbian had a plausible excuse to put off or avoid marriage altogether.\textsuperscript{80}

Lesbians worked in a variety of occupations that opened to women during the war. Prior to WWII, lesbians were often drawn to nursing, police work, and journalism, but the war offered further opportunities.\textsuperscript{81} One woman who worked on a canal boat crew in Hayes during the war recalled that boating “was considered an ideal occupation for lesbians. The only trouble being that the odd numbers of the crews made for jealousy.”\textsuperscript{82} A female journalist attached to a London police beat befriended the local prostitutes, several of whom were lesbians who sold sex to

\textsuperscript{78} Goodman, \textit{Women, Sexuality and War}, 140.
\textsuperscript{79} Goodman, \textit{Women, Sexuality and War}, 140.
\textsuperscript{80} Hamer, \textit{Brittania’s Glory}, 117.
\textsuperscript{81} Jivani, \textit{It’s Not Unusual}, 73.
support their children. She later found that many of the Fire Service volunteer drivers were lesbians as well. Lesbians were common in the wartime military; obituaries of servicewomen sometimes tellingly mentioned a “close relationship with a fellow officer.”

Prior to WWII, women were strongly discouraged from going to pubs, lest they be viewed as prostitutes. However, as women moved into the public sphere, they began to frequent pubs and clubs more often. By 1944, this extension of public drinking culture to women, plus the geographic uprooting of so many single women under conscription, allowed more lesbian-friendly clubs to emerge. The increase in women who earned their own wages increased the patronage of lesbian clubs. Lesbian bars existed in Britain prior to the war, but their patrons were rigidly stratified by class. Many clubs’ clientele consisted of wealthy women who preyed on sexually inexperienced working-class girls. One woman recalled that as a working-class teen in the 1930s, she and her friends would go to a tearoom in the West End where “you could always pick up—if you wanted—some bored rich woman dripping with gold and jewels.” The Forum Club in Knightsbridge was another lesbian club that was “truly luxurious, a far cry from the poor and depressing female institutions that Virginia Woolf described in A Room of One’s Own.” During the war, more accessible institutions opened—often clubs that catered to both straight and gay crowds, such as the Gateways club in Chelsea, which was packed with heterosexuals in the daytime and lesbians at night. Brighton had several clubs that

83 Jivani, It’s Not Unusual, 74.
84 Jivani, It’s Not Unusual, 75.
85 Hamer, Britannia’s Glory, 142.
86 Goodman, Women, Sexuality and War, 109.
87 Jennings, A Lesbian History of Britain, 135.
88 Jennings, A Lesbian History of Britain, 133.
89 Barbara Bell, Just Take Your Frock Off: A Lesbian Life (Brighton: Ourstory Books, 1999), 65-66, as quoted in Jennings, A Lesbian History of Britain, 134.
90 Hamer, Britannia’s Glory, 132.
91 Jennings, A Lesbian History of Britain, 136.
were open to both gay men and lesbians. Thus the 1940s heralded an expanded and more egalitarian lesbian bar culture.

While men could be imprisoned for engaging in same-sex relations, “what women did may have been frowned upon but it wasn’t actually against the law and so no action could be taken.” This lack of legal consequence was not due to tolerance, but due to the British government’s unwillingness to even acknowledge lesbianism. In 1921, Parliament rejected a bill that would have made “gross indecency between female persons” illegal, reasoning that talking about lesbianism would lead otherwise innocent women to experiment with one another. The A.T.S. agreed with this policy of ignoring lesbianism; medical officers were sent documents about lesbians In the ATS, officers were instructed on how to deal with lesbian recruits on a need-to-know basis. (Ironically, the chief medical officer of the A.T.S., Albertine Winner, focused her postwar career on psychoanalytic reports on lesbians.)

Lesbian visibility thus remained minimal, and large swathes of the population remained ignorant of its very existence, let alone the idea that lesbians might be predatory towards heterosexual women. One teen in the A.T.S. recalled that in her unit, women were “big and tough and they swore, smoked and drank like the men,” and at least one lesbian couple was openly acknowledged, but the innocent writer thought that couples simply “slept together to keep themselves warm.” Another teenager in the A.T.S. speculated that “lesbian” must have been “a religion.”

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92 Jennings, A Lesbian History of Britain, 139.
93 Jivani, It’s Not Unusual, 72.
94 Jennings, A Lesbian History of Britain, 113.
95 Jennings, Tomboys and Bachelor Girls, 67.
96 Jennings, Tomboys and Bachelor Girls, 28.
During the war, however, lesbianism did attract some unfavorable legal notice. In 1942, a legal opinion concluded that lesbianism was encompassed by the definition of “unchastity” included in the 1891 Slander of Women Act, and that “unnatural relations with other women” were “more wounding, more likely to excite abhorrence on the part of average reasonable people, more likely to spoil [a woman’s] prospect of marriage” than heterosexual extramarital activity.99 This increased awareness of lesbianism led to some wariness of masculine or single women. One former evacuee wrote that she was removed by her mother from a farmhouse billet because her mother was concerned that the farmer’s daughter, who shared a bed with the evacuee, was “a lesbian and not a healthy sleeping companion for a young girl.”100

Despite the stigma, lesbians did find sex and romance during the war, particularly when working in female-only environments. Two nurses who had an affair while working in a hospital in Hastings were caught together in bed and separated by a head nurse several times in one night; one of the women recalled later that “It was terribly rash, but she didn’t care. I didn’t care!”101 In response, the hospital administration assigned the women to different wards and made sure they never had time off at the same time.102 This experience was echoed in the A.T.S., where lesbians were usually just reassigned to separate locations, with “only a very few promiscuous lesbians” actually being discharged.103 Somewhat tolerant attitudes were present in other industries as well. The previously mentioned boater, after regarding her lesbian coworkers with an “uncertain

99 Kerr v Kennedy, 1 All ER (1942) 412, as quoted in Oram and Turnbull, The Lesbian History Sourcebook, 170-171.
101 Jivani, It’s Not Unusual, 72.
102 Jivani, It’s Not Unusual, 72.
shiver,” finally “decided so long as they left me alone it didn’t matter.” Thus, in some circumstances, lesbians could remain unmarried and reasonably open about their orientations as long as they remained discreet and didn’t harass heterosexual women. With the advent of peacetime, “masculine” industries closed to women once again, and lesbians found it more difficult to find work that combined financial independence with the opportunity to be “out.”

The gains that women made socially and financially during WWII were not insignificant. More women than ever gained experience working outside of the home, earning wages and leading public lives. The social dislocation of war offered the opportunity for sexual exploration. Lesbians took advantage of the opportunity to work and live without men, often in a female-only environment. Yet these freedoms were tempered and contained by a social backlash that insisted all of these changes would only be “for the duration.” Nella Last wrote that “I cannot see women settling to trivial ways [after the war]—women who have done worthwhile things,” but after the war, these gains were largely erased. Despite a Mass Observation prediction that postwar women would desire “equal social rights and similar opportunities to get outside the confines of home-base, to see fresh faces and to go places and to do things,” women did return to the domestic sphere in peacetime. Peacetime marriage rates were even higher than pre-war marriage rates, and fewer women worked outside the home. Many women found it difficult reconcile their past independence with the renewed expectation to marry and have children. Though individual women often remembered the war as a time of independence and self-

106 Jivani, It’s Not Unusual, 90.
107 Sheridan, “Ambivalent Memories,” 34.
reliance, women as a group were bound ever more tightly to the strictures of femininity, controlled sexuality, and dependence on men.
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