Volunteer opportunities at the Royal Voluntary Service Archive & Heritage Collection, Devizes, Wiltshire.

What is the Royal Voluntary Service?

Originally founded in 1938 as the Women’s Voluntary Service, the organisation was established to help recruit women into the ARP movement. Its focus however, soon out grew its original purpose, with volunteers assisting in all aspects of wartime life, most famously with the evacuation and billeting of children. The efforts from its members during this testing time earned the organisation the nickname ‘The Army Hitler Forgot.’

After the war, the organisation transformed to become a leading influence in the field of social care, pioneering the practices that formed the cornerstone of modern social services and becoming the largest volunteering organisation in British history.

In 1966 the organisation was granted the honour of adding ‘Royal’ to its title by its Patron, Her Majesty the Queen, becoming the Women’s Royal Voluntary Service. This year, 2013, WRVS celebrated its 75th anniversary and had changed its name to the Royal Voluntary Service.

How was the archive established and what does it contain?

The Royal Voluntary Service Archive & Heritage Collection was formed in 1958, to gather and keep safe, records which were of long term historical value. Since then, the archive has been collecting material from within the organisation and from volunteers, in the UK and overseas, to tell the amazing story of over one million women and men who have given extraordinary service to their communities, helping to shape British society. The collection now includes approximately two million documents, nearly 15,000 photographs and thousands of unique items of uniform and objects. The archive is currently situated in Devizes, Wiltshire.

In 2010 the WVS and WRVS narrative reports, which form a significant part of the collection, were awarded UK Memory of the world status by the United Nations educational, cultural and scientific organisation (UNESCO) and are considered to be of outstanding importance and value to the UK.
To learn more about the collection and the organisation it supports:
Visit our website:
http://www.royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk/about-us/our-history
Read our blog:
Search our online catalogue:
http://catalogue.royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk/calmview/

Our Volunteers: these are some of the experiences of our volunteers here at the Archives

“For the last year though I have been immersed in the world of marketing photographs from the 1990s and early 2000s. When I started I was presented with eight boxes of photographic prints, negatives and CD-roms, all of which had very little discernible order! My job for the last 12 months has been to try and put these back in their original order or where this is impossible to impose something logical.

As I leaf through the thousands of pictures there is the joy of disposing of the utterly irrelevant, such as pictures of dogs, hands and plates of food; pictures with little or no long term historical value. Also the elation of finding one of the pictures amongst the thousands in a publication and being able to reunite it with its context; a eureka moment (especially when I have remembered the picture from several months before).

I had a short break (escape) to take photographs of our collection of enamel badges (I’m a bit of an amateur photographer), before diving back in. Currently I am laboriously writing reference numbers on the back of each image, a task which is almost at its end (I hope to finish in October, Phew!)”

“I’ve been working here at the archive in Devizes almost since we started four years ago, in that time I’ve done all sorts of jobs from sorting uniform to accessioning new material and now I am putting some old skills to use and cataloguing the library of books we have here.

To enable me to catalogue them properly I inevitably have to read them all, or at least scan through them. The tales that I have read can be funny or sometimes very sad. I do particularly like the memoirs and poems, getting lost in the stories of evacuees or wartime WVS ladies doing their bit for Blighty. My favourite so far has to be Nella Last and her wonderful diary, a testament to her aspiration to become a writer and her commitment to the WVS both during and after the War. Sometimes she wrote 1,000 words every evening. Her work feeding airmen in her services canteen and working in the centre at Barrow in Furness should be an inspiration to all.”
“When I retired, I joined WRVS and did a weekly round delivering Meals on Wheels. Some of the recipients were not much older than I was which made me feel fortunate that I was able to perform this worthwhile service.

Years later, I saw an article in the local paper about the opening of the Archive Collection in Devizes, with an appeal for volunteers. I come along one afternoon a week and the tasks allocated to me have introduced me to what the Collection is about; to begin with I sorted out magazines, brochures, flyers, photographs etc. I then spent some time cataloguing the photographs which involved describing the scene, the people, the date; this was most interesting, especially looking at the wartime ones.

Now I am working on the Narrative Reports. Over the years they have become a bit worse for wear so I am unfolding creases and removing old rusty staples and pins; while doing this I glance through them and one needs to look no further than these Reports to know about a “caring society”. WVS/WRVS members were involved in all aspects of community welfare.

An afternoon in the life of this apprentice Archivist is never dull.”

If you are living near Devizes, Wiltshire and feel that you would like to know more, or would be interested in giving your time, please get in touch, we would love to hear from you.

To contact the archive: To speak to the archivist (Matthew McMurray) or Deputy Archivist (Jennifer Hunt):

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