

FUND RAISING/ VOLUNTARY WORK

The First World War prompted a new wave of voluntary activity and the foundation of many charities that provided for servicemen and their families – some are still active today.

In the early days of August 1914, a stream of wealthy and well-connected people visited Whitehall and volunteered to put their substantial resources at the disposal of the War Office.

Volunteering of this kind became essential to the war effort, at home and in battle areas. The sheer scale of help required was unprecedented. Civilian volunteers and charities helped create a social cohesion that bolstered morale among British troops. But the millions of donations and thousands of new charities also forced the government to introduce legislation to regulate the sector along lines that are familiar today. Nearly 18,000 charities were established during the four years of the war. Donations rose throughout the war years and continued into the 1920s.

The most popular causes were “comforts” – including clothing, books and food – for British and Empire troops, medical services, support for disabled servicemen, organisations for relieving distress at home, aid for refugees and countries overseas, assistance to prisoners of war and post-war remembrance and celebration.

As reservists were called up, the loss of the main wage-earner created severe hardship for many families. At first, the war exacerbated unemployment, because the markets for some goods collapsed. The government quickly realised men would not volunteer to fight if they did not believe that their homes and families would be looked after. A National Relief Fund was set up with Edward, Prince of Wales, as treasurer, to help the families of serving men and those suffering from “industrial distress”. Within a week, donations to the fund had reached £1m.

For most of the population, fundraising became part of daily life. Local newspapers carried details of money and goods collected through dances, fetes and sales of produce and work. In the streets posters advertised wartime charities and women sold lapel-pin flags from trays. Picture postcards were sold to raise funds. Children played a significant role in the war effort. Their activities were built into the school week and they were encouraged to donate their breakfasts to “Egg Day”, on which eggs were collected for wounded soldiers.

Concern grew about the management of funds. Many organisations, including the National Relief Fund, were slow to distribute money and marshal their volunteers. Some disillusioned regular contributors withdrew their support. A few charities were exposed as fraudulent and many more were poorly managed and had high running costs. Flag days were a particular problem and were totally unregulated until 1915, when local authorities were given the powers to license them. Donated items were of variable quality and the distribution was chaotic. The government appointed Sir Edward Ward, a retired soldier, to the post of Director General of Voluntary Organisations. Ward issued leaflets giving instructions for making items, set up systems for matching supply with demand and organised transport. This coordinated approach was a great success and the scheme supplied more than 322 million items to troops during its existence. Eventually the War Charities Act 1916 was established. It made registration for public appeals compulsory and gave local authorities the power to decide which organisations would be registered or exempt. This local emphasis meant that there were wide variations in the way the act was applied, especially in relation to defining a war charity, and to what constituted a public appeal.

The work of charities did not end with the Armistice in November 1918. Ex-servicemen faced hardship as war production gave way to a peacetime economy of high prices made worse by high unemployment. Ex-servicemen begging were a common sight and wartime charities focused on providing for the millions disabled in the war.