

Women of Caulfield during World War One

1915



Photo: Red Cross Volunteers work in a corner of the ballroom of Melbourne's Government House, ... 'Already there are neat stacks of pyjamas, flannel shirts, socks ... and also rolls of material ready to be made up', a newspaper reported before the war was three weeks old. (AWM J00346; Melbourne Argus, 22 August 1914, p. 16)

- Middle class women who lived through the Great War never enjoyed the exciting social life and employment opportunities that the next generation were to experience in World War Two.
- Michael McKernan commented that “women directed their energies to providing help for the victims of war and comforts for the Australian troops. The war ...confirmed rather than challenged their place in society.
- The Watson women were not alone in suffering uncertainties and fears about relatives at the Front. Wives and daughters of the middle and upper classes like Mrs Watson and her daughters were to become the backbone of the Red Cross Society.
- By August 1915 there were 337 branches in Melbourne. Enormous quantities of socks, vests, mufflers and mittens for the troops overseas, and pyjamas, shirts and bandages for those hospitalised, were regularly delivered to the ballroom of the Governor General's temporary residence in St Kilda Road.

1916

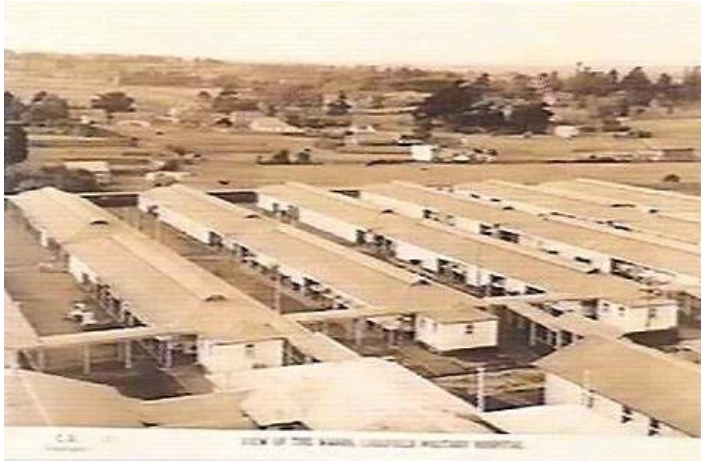


Photo: Caulfield military hospital circa 1916, *Museums Victoria*



Photo: Red Cross Rest House, Caulfield Military Hospital World War 1, *Museums Victoria*

- A year later the Australian Comforts Fund, was formed to coordinate 'comforts' for the soldiers- tobacco, cakes, puddings, condensed milk, biscuits and newspapers etc.
- Except for Nursing, women were not generally employed in any military capacity during the 1914-18 war. Midway through the war in 1916 the Australian General Military Hospital No 11 was established in Kooyong Road (now Caulfield Hospital).
- It continued to grow very rapidly as injured soldiers were shipped back to Australia. For many patients burnt by gases and deformed by gangrene it was to become their permanent home.
- The Caulfield Red Cross and other organisations created the Rest House to accommodate soldiers who came from the country for treatment. The ladies served teas and cleaned the rooms.

1917-18



- In 1917 the Red Cross held a Grand Carnival at the Caulfield Race course to raise much needed funds. Mrs Watson's nephew Basil Watson, a well known aviator participated.
- Meanwhile there was a shortage of servants which affected the efficient running of households, but Mrs Watson had run Labassa quite modestly since the death of her husband.
- While food was not rationed, prices soared and the Government took steps to limit price rises.
- In the political arena, the voices of women were raised during national debates like the ultimately successful hotel 'early closing' legislation.
- Meanwhile leading figures for the 'Yes' campaign in the Conscription Referenda were known to have drawn on the 'organisational and entrepreneurial skills that women had developed in their Red Cross branches and their Comforts fund guilds'.

For further information on the role of Australian Women during World War One, click [here](#).