Most history starts with a find. So what happens when you start with an urban myth?

Today riverboat pilots on the Thames tell the story that Waterloo Bridge was built by women in World War 2.

The Ladies Bridge documentary explores why these bridge builders and 24,000 other female construction workers have been written out of history.

Documentary 28mins © Concrete History 2006

Directed by Karen Livesey and produced by Jo Wiser

For information please contact: www.ladiesbridge.co.uk

The Ladies Bridge

Excerpts of suggested source material for use with the film.

Produced by Concrete History and Dr Christine Wall

Exercises devised by Derek Moir; Head of History, Brit School

For complete version and more information please visit www.ladiesbridge.co.uk

She navvies throw heavy stones about with ease 29.9.42 New York Times
Introduction

Two years in to the Second World War Ernest Bevin, the Minister of Labour and National Service, faced an acute manpower crisis on the home front. He called on women to help the war effort and in 1941 introduced compulsory registration of women aged 19-40 for employment. It is well known that thousands of women did their bit by working in the heavy industries: they were employed in shipbuilding, engineering, aircraft manufacture and munitions. It is less well known that considerable numbers also worked in the construction industry, with an estimated 24,000 women working ‘on the tools’ by mid 1945. Women worked at labouring, painting, bricklaying and carpentry as well as driving cranes. Much of this essential work was on building new factories and associated housing for the workers in places remote from the threat of bombs, or the airfields in East Anglia. But essential work also carried on throughout the war in the centre of London, one of the biggest projects being the rebuilding of Waterloo Bridge between 1939-45.

Dr Christine Wall
Concrete History

Concrete History – a group of filmmakers and historians recording remarkable stories of women's achievements have been tracing the story of the women who built Waterloo Bridge during WW2. Inspired by the story kept alive by the river boat pilots on the Thames, director Karen Livesey instigated the project in Spring 2005, she was soon joined by Dr Christine Wall of the Working Lives Research Institute who has been researching the story for many years. The film was completed 18 months later after months of research, through outreach with local groups, reminiscence workshops and features in local and national publications and radio.

Research continues...
Can you help?

With the women likely to be in their 80s and 90s and no written records, the search goes on.

Time is of the essence.

We would love to hear from anyone who has any information about the women who worked on Waterloo Bridge, or any of the thousands of other women who worked in construction during the second world war.

Please contact:
Karen Livesey
info@theladiesbridge.co.uk
First source questions

Source A

At the outbreak of war there were 500 men employed on the bridge, by June 1940 this had dropped to 150, provoking an acute labour crisis. In October 1941 the government and the unions agreed conditions under which women could work in the building industry – these were very restricted so that women were not able to work at skilled jobs and they also earned only a fraction of male wages. Nevertheless, by 1944 there were around 25,000 women working in the building industry. The contractors building the bridge argued for more time and more money because of the particular labour problems – they used the phrase ‘green labour’ which is unskilled and inexperienced labour, as one of the reasons the contract fell behind schedule. They didn’t actually say they had had to use women on the workforce – although it was implied… Because Waterloo Bridge was a structure of strategic importance there was strict censorship on news of its progress…

“I was hoping, like most historians want to find a cache of letters, a deposit in an archive, maybe the diary of a woman who’d worked on the bridge in the same way you were hoping to find a woman still alive who could tell her story of working on the bridge. Of course the other thing is when you’re doing manual work, you’re really tired. I mean it’s highly unlikely after a hard day of wheeling wheelbarrows of concrete about in hard conditions are they really going to go home and write a diary about their experiences on Waterloo Bridge?”

Dr Christine Wall – Historian, text and interview 2006

Source B

“The men who built Waterloo Bridge are fortunate men. They know that, although their names may be forgotten, their work will be a pride and use to London for many generations to come. To the hundreds of workers in stone, in steel, in timber, in concrete the new bridge is a monument to their skill and craftsmanship.”

Herbert Morrison – Commissioned bridge and was leader of LCC. Quoted from his speech at the opening of the new bridge 1945.

Source C

“I can remember seeing ladies here… I think there was quite a few hundred ladies up here they did the less technical jobs, the lifting and the tugging where the men done the crane work and the technical type of work. And the ladies were in two grades of ladies. The ladies with the turbans and the dungarees you know with the bib up – there was more of them – but the ladies which were like the senior lady that could drive and could undertake a more of a technical job like, they wore an all in one overall a bit similar to the men… They probably didn’t remember the women working on the bridge because they didn’t look like women, you know if you have a flat cap on and an overall all in one, even today I have a lot of trouble to see who’s a man and who’s a lady. My father he used to love the ladies…”

David Church – Son of crane driver on Waterloo Bridge interviewed in 2006.

Questions

1. Comment on ‘By 1944 there were around 25,000 women working in the construction industry’ in the context of women’s wartime experiences. Use Source A and your own knowledge.

2. How useful is Source B as evidence about the role of women in the Second World War? Use Source B and your own knowledge.

3. ‘The impact of the Second World War between 1939 and 1945 completely transformed the roles and status of women in Britain.’ Explain why you agree or disagree with this statement. Use Sources A, B and C and your own knowledge.
**Second source questions**

**Source A** *(DVD chapter 6)*

“He expected that I was going to come back to the old form of just being the housewife and wife, as did the government, but you know I’d had my bit of going out to work and I liked it. So that I didn’t really want to settle down, so I suppose that upset him, but it caused lots of problems.

Everybody had some problem or another, cos we weren’t the same women and they weren’t, they were young fellas that went away, come back they’re serious men.”

*Doris born 1914. Lived in Pimlico, lost her first husband during the war. Volunteered for WRAF as stenographer.*

**Source B** *(DVD chapter 6)*

“Well I wasn’t quite the lady that I used to be. No, it was just that you got into some of their ways you know, it’s only natural, very nice and all that, I mean people respected you for what you did.

I was in hospital recently talking about the war and a man was going on about the war: I said “I remember it well, I did electric welding.” He said “No, you never done any welding! How does she know about electric welding? Women’s job?” He didn’t believe it, couldn’t believe it, but it was perfectly true.”

*Edith born 1907 in Lambeth one of twelve children, single parent, trained as a welder to build Bailey Bridges during the war.*

**Source C** *(DVD chapter 6)*

“I hated that man (that came back from war and took back his job), cos, I enjoyed the job, it was lovely because it had a foreign element – everything was exported or imported because that’s what London was in those days. So then when the man came back, I went into the accounts department.”

*Irene born 1929 lived in Kennington. Worked as a shipping clerk for export/import agents 1946-47 until the male employee was demobbed and reclaimed his job.*

**Source D** *(DVD chapter 6)*

“So in 1945 women made up over 3% of manual workers in the construction industry. In 2005, they make up 1%. So there were more proportionally then than there are now. Those who accessed work on building sites, their contracts were terminated. They were effectively ousted in favour of men. There’s a record of a conference called by women who worked in construction asking the trade unions to change and let women in alongside men. They wanted the government and the country to utilise their skills they wanted to be part of reconstructing the New Britain, they wanted to build the New Britain, and they wanted to help and it didn’t happen.”

*Dr Christine Wall – Historian – previously trained and worked as a carpenter and architect.*

**Questions**

1. **What does Source A tell us about how World War Two changed people?**

2. **Source D states ‘Women… wanted to be part of reconstructing the New Britain… It didn’t happen.’ Use Source D and your own knowledge to explain why it didn’t happen.**

3. **How useful are Sources A,B,C and D to an historian studying the roles of women in 1945? Use Sources A,B,C and D and your own knowledge to answer this question.**

Teachers may find it useful to show ‘Jane Brown changes her job’ Chapter 2 and discuss propaganda and class issues.
Suggested role play

A dinner party in May 1945, consider the effects of the war on women and how the roles of women have changed. Should there be a return to pre-war attitudes and patterns of employment?

Suggested roles

A 45 year old upper class suffragette, with three grown children.

A 55 year old upper class WW1 General (married to the suffragette?).

Working class soldier (private) seen service since 1939.

A middle class young woman who worked in the factories during the war and experienced working class conditions for the first time.

A working class factory worker – mother of three kids (childcare problems) – angry that the new ‘war workers’ have reduced her pay and compromised her hard won union rights?

Middle class civil servant who worked with women for the first time and “Rather enjoyed the experience!”

Traditional working class male TUC official – keen to defend his male employees and pre-war workers – wants to see the Restoration of Pre-war Practices Act implemented ASAP.

A 25 year old working class woman who worked in construction as part of her war work and wasn’t allowed to continue.

Suggested resources

www.ladiesbridge.co.uk

Imperial War Museum:
www.iwm.org.uk

British Pathe Film Archive:
www.britishpathe.com

ITN Source:
www.itnsource.com

BBC Radio 4 Woman’s Hour Timeline:
www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/womanhour/timeline

BBC History Website
www.bbc.co.uk/history

London Metropolitan Archives
www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/lma

Working Lives Research Institute
www.workinglives.org

The Women’s Library:
www.londonmet.ac.uk/thewomenslibrary

British Library:
www.bl.uk

UK Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology:
www.setwomenresource.org.uk

Women and Manual Trades (WAMT):
www.wamt.org

Women into Science and Engineering (WISE):
www.wisecampaign.org.uk

The Womens’ Engineering Society (WES):
www.wes.org.uk

 Trades Union Congress (TUC)

Britain at work:
www.tuc.org.uk

TUC Library:
www.londonmet.ac.uk

Suggested Reading


Jane Waller and Michael Vaughn-Rees ‘Women in Uniform 1939-45’ (Macmillan 1989)

Dorothy Sheridan ‘Wartime Women: A Mass-Observation Anthology’ (Heinemann1990)

Gail Braybon, Penny Summerfield ‘Out of the Cage’ (Harper Collins 1987)

Ed. Claire Duchen and Irene Bandhauer-Schoffman ‘When the war was over’ (Leicester University Press 2000)