

BAWDSEY RADAR TRANSMITTER BLOCK

Title of project/activity

Women on the Front Line - WAAF Radar Operators at Bawdsey in WWII

Partners

Propeller, Anthony Chadwick, Cadets, BT, Di Redmond and Liz Trenow, authors working on novels to be published in 2020 about the role of women in radar in WW2.

Funding

SHARE Museums East 'Hidden Histories: Collections Interpretation' grant ref SME-1819-27 - 2672.00

Bawdsey Radar Trust - 500.00

Bawdsey Radar Trust - in-kind contribution from volunteers and interns: research, label and text writing, display and interpretation

Suffolk CC Locality Funding - £350

Background

On 24th September 1937, RAF Bawdsey became the first fully operational Radar station in the world. Many of the first generation of Royal Air Force (RAF) and Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) radar personnel were trained at Bawdsey. The WAAF, or female auxiliary unit of the RAF, was established in 1939 and at its peak exceeded numbers of 180,000 with 2,000 women enlisting per week. 8000 WAAF personal served in radar during WWII and played a pivotal role in securing the Allied victory.

Today Bawdsey Radar Trust (BRT) shares the decisive story of radar. Yet the voices of the WAAF are under-represented in the displays and interpretation. The stories of the women who trained and served at Bawdsey during WWII remain frustratingly hidden in the Trust's collections of watch and service records, written/oral histories and photographs.

Women on the Front Line' will enable BRT to develop how it communicates a hidden, yet integral, aspect of the collections. The project will change perceptions amongst our current/potential visitors – many women visitors to Bawdsey feel that the story of radar development is not part of their history. By becoming representative of our collections, we will diversify and develop our audiences.

Working in partnership with Suffolk STEM Ambassadors will allow BRT to explore relevant, contemporary issues, such as women working in traditionally male dominated roles and female empowerment, through its own collections. By relating the secrecy element of the work to current advances in technology such as cyber security this will bring to the fore the cutting edge nature of the women's work in radar.

This is a new approach for Bawdsey and a new attitude in using the collections to engage with contemporary issues such as the under representation of women in history, issues of equal pay (WAAFS were paid two-thirds less than their male counterparts in the RAF), and the role of women after the war.

Key Objectives (bullet points sufficient)

- Research into our existing collections to identify and better understand the definitive story at the Bawdsey WAAF. This has been a major part of the volunteer/staff work on this project and has involved a significant amount of reading and identifying supporting material and images.
- To update and refresh the permanent exhibition to reveal this hidden history to visitors and researchers. The new display comprises 6 new panels, photographs and a short film. The research findings will be added to the searchable database in the museum, available on the museum website and used on social media to pique interest and lead visitors to hidden history via the museum itself and/ or digitally.
- To diversify our current audience and attract new audiences.
- An create an outreach offer, to share this story with new audiences via talks, the website and social media.
- To pilot a STEM Event, a Bawdsey Radar Trust first, to develop our offer for younger audiences in a new partnership with the Suffolk STEM Ambassador program. This will be piloted in Q1 2020 with support from BT and the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) on the topic of radar security issues during wartime. The initial audience will be local Air Cadets (50% female).

Which of the CCD evidence areas does the activity address

- Integrating diversity in the museum's programme. The current museum displays attract a fairly wide range of visitors but our visitor research tells us it can be seen as a male-orientated story, with its science, engineering and war related content. The women's story, their roles as radar operators, radar mechanics and wider range of WAAF roles is not as prominent as it should be in the displays and exhibition.
- Collections are viewed from diverse perspectives and tell untold stories. This project has uncovered both written evidence and stories from, crucially, first-hand accounts from women who served in the WAAF. Through this project contact has been made with a Bawdsey Girl, Doris Ashurst, who was in WAAF at Bawdsey 1942-43. Doris and her family made a visit to the museum in December 2019 and we intend to meet with Doris in 2020 as part of the events programme planned alongside this project.
- The roles of women in radar with Wrens and the ATS are also untold stories that our research only briefly touches. Contact has been made with a Wren and a first-hand account achieved of her work as a radar mechanic.
- This has proved to be an ambitious project for an organisation on the path to becoming an accredited museum. It has involved many people who, apart from our VSO, have little experience of museums



and collections work, however it has been driven by enthusiasm for the subject and the belief that it will diversify and develop our audience.

Process

Finding new information has been a very interesting part of the project. There is a great deal 'out there' to be found and this has presented a considerable challenge. An enormous number of time-consuming rabbit holes were disappeared down! It has been very helpful to have our interns involved, both of whom have history degrees and the knowledge of the disciplines necessary to do the research. Making use of material we already have - oral histories and few artefacts has been very useful.

The project could be extended if funds and time were available. Radar and its use in the Wrens and ATS has already been mentioned. An interesting and unexpected thread to follow has been the role women and the science of radar. More research into the lives of women and their involvement in post war technological developments would be worthy of exploration.

Outcome

From real experience, we know that women visitors to the Transmitter Block will often chose to wait outside, as "the history of radar is not for them". The hidden voices of 8000 WAAF can tell a different story and the activities of this project will start to change that perception and diversify our audiences.

The development of radar is important; it played a crucial role in WWII and fundamentally affects our lives today from medical advances to travel safety. The WAAF are genuinely under-represented in all aspects of the museum's displays, media and outreach – only half the story is being told and this is having a detrimental effect on our profile as an organisation and audiences.

Once the exhibition opens to the public on 5 April 2020, we will collect visitor evaluation to test and produce qualitative and quantitative evidence that this project overcomes these barriers as well as meets the project objectives.

(see 'Conclusions' section below for more information on project evaluation).

Key points for effective practice- identify the most important points in the case study for other museums/ organisations

Be focussed

Be clear on objectives

Be realistic about how long it takes and what resources are available

That it might turn out to be a much bigger story/ lead to future projects/ help clarify forward plans/ funding issues/ with development opportunities for both the Trust and the volunteers.

With the overwhelming historical records being written by men, it was well recognised that we would not have the depth of information available to the team that other parts of the radar story rely on. In this respect the research phase of the project has had to be much extended and has consequently squeezed the time available for the production of finished materials. Another project would benefit from a longer period to tease out such details and should assume that the discovery of (and subsequent validating of) information will be very time consuming.

Conclusions/recommendations

BRT are working on a comprehensive evaluation package with an external consultant as part of the Heritage Lottery funded re-development project. This will include evaluation of all activities the museum undertakes in 2019-20 including the 'Women on the Front Line' project.

"Personally, I can't believe that Mary Taylor isn't better known.(the) exhibition at Bawdsey Radar next year called , 'Who wore the trousers?'; it's part of the Hidden Histories project and will feature a short summary of Mary Taylor, putting her in her rightful place alongside her better known male colleagues, Robert Watson Watt and Arnold Wilkins."

Head of Content at Propeller

"I am conscious / remember from our meeting yesterday, looking through those black and white pictures within the WAAF book and just having this overwhelming sense of emotion.

Exhibition display consultant

- For me it was the dichotomy of the WAAF and indeed all people working together in unison to achieve a common purpose and thank goodness they did.

- Against the back drop of doing this out of necessity and through the adversity of war.

Really looking forward to working together as a team on this project and bringing those female Hidden History stories to the fore, with the intention to spark the future generations interest. "

