

Stories of the steely determination of wartime women

The Women of Steel were once among the forgotten war heroes. Now finally their memories have been recorded for posterity. Sarah Freeman reports.

DURING the Second World War, Sheffield's Women of Steel didn't consider themselves particularly special.

When their fathers, husbands and brothers were called up to fight for King and country, their departure left a massive gap in the workforce and it fell to the women to take their place in the city's many steel factories and foundries.

Like many women up and down the country they suddenly found themselves thrust into the heart of industry, forced to juggle family life with the demands of full-time work. Their job was to keep the Army in bullets and tanks and they did so without complaint.

However, when the war finally ended in 1945, their services were no longer required. Employment was desperately needed for the thousands of returning servicemen and overnight, the women went from being factory supervisors and key cogs in the production line back to housewives.

As the months turned into years, their vital role on the home front was forgotten. However, when a campaign was launched to properly recognise the contribution of the Land Girls, who had kept the nation fed during the war years, the Women of Steel began to wonder whether they too should be shouting a little louder.

As the ball began rolling, Number 10 became involved and, last February, four of the women were invited to meet then-Prime Minister Gordon Brown and special letters of thanks were sent out. However, for many of those, who have spent the intervening 60 years not talking much about the back-breaking work or the dangerous conditions in which they spent the war, the ultimate recognition came this week when they were asked to record their memories for posterity.

Meeting with students from the University of Sheffield, they talked about their role, the ups and downs of factory life and the effect the war had on their personal relationships. Linked to the Storying Sheffield project, which sees students working with

the wider community with the aim of producing oral histories of their lives, the recordings will be available to listen to in the New Year.

"The experiences of these women are so far removed from anything we have been through," says Holly Willis, a third-year

student from the university's School of English. "It's really important to keep these memories alive and give these women an opportunity to pass their stories onto our generation."

Those who contributed to the oral history project, included

Kathleen Roberts and Ruby

Gascoigne, who were among the delegation to Downing Street. For them, like many of the women who found themselves unceremoniously dumped from their jobs when the war ended, the last 12 months has been a chance to set the record straight.

"Their courage and sheer determination was incredible," says Sarah Jackson, another of the students involved in the recording. "Many of them spent years apart from their loved ones and they just accepted that was the way things were."

"At the time I don't think they realised how vital the work they were doing was. One of the women only found out years afterwards the metal she had been testing was key to the success of the D-Day operation."

The Women of Steel had much to contend with during the war. There was the heat of the factories where death and injury was not uncommon and the continual threat of attack from the German bombers which regularly flew overhead.

Add in the long hours – most worked 12 hour shifts – a ban on holidays and days off and the withholding of pay when problems were found within any batch of work and it's easy to see why many now feel that recognition of the Women of Steel



is long overdue.

“Until recently no-one has really asked them what they did during the war,” adds Sarah. “At they time they just put their heads down and got on with the job, but the commitment they showed is just a small snapshot of the war effort and the role Britain’s women played in it.

“Their stories are just as important as the memories of those who served on the front line and hopefully we have now created something that will ensure their stories and courage lives on.”

■ The recordings, which will be posted on the website www.storyingsheffield.com in the New Year, will be showcased at the Off the Shelf History weekend in February. For more details visit www.offtheshelf.org.uk or call 0114 273 4400.



POSTERITY: Ruby Gascoigne, who worked in Sheffield’s foundries during the war, talks to students Jenny Richards, left, and Sarah Jackson.

