

'The Front Line': Firefighting in British Culture, 1939-1945

This article examines cultural depictions of firemen during the Second World War in film, radio and visual culture. It focuses on the masculine identities ascribed to those unable to fulfil the idealised masculine role of being in the armed forces. The article argues that firemen's role in the defence of Britain gave them access to many, if not all, of the ideal attributes more commonly associated with the venerated image of the armed forces hero. However, such an image was temporally specific and only prominent during the months of the Blitz. As such, this article imparts important knowledge about men and masculinity in this period.

Keywords: Firefighting, Second World War, Home Front, Masculinity, Gender.

In May 1941 Herbert Morrison, Labour politician and then Home Secretary, declared:

The House [of Commons] and the country must face the fact that an air attack is not a treat. It is a grim thing. It is an act of war. People who think that it is only a matter of going out next morning and sweeping up the waste paper are quite wrong. Raids are acts of war which create very considerable disturbance. Firemen faced with incidents of the kind I have related deserve our sympathy and support.¹

During the Second World War, as Morrison makes evident, firefighting was a home front civilian job unlike any other. Those 'heroes with grimy faces', as Churchill described them,² were not only called upon to fight fires, an extremely dangerous job under any circumstances, but also often had to do so while the Luftwaffe were still dropping bombs overhead. The men of Britain's fire services risked serious injury and even death to protect people and buildings. Indeed, 16,000 firemen lost their lives in the course of the war.³ Yet, despite their obviously dangerous and vital role in the war effort, the fire services have, discounting some popular efforts, been little considered by historians.⁴ While, for example, Sonya Rose does make reference to the men of the fire services being depicted as 'epic heroes' this idea has not been

thoroughly scrutinised.⁵ This article will, therefore, add to the burgeoning historiography on the wartime civilian male as well as work on civil defence by exploring the cultural depiction of Britain's firemen in wartime.⁶

Unsurprisingly, in wartime the ideal masculinity very much centred upon those in the armed forces. The soldier hero, as argued by Graham Dawson, had long been a central tenet of British national identity and a 'real man' was often 'defined and recognized as one who was prepared to fight (and, if necessary, to sacrifice his life) for Queen, Country and Empire'.⁷ However, the aftermath of the First World War had seen a decrease in the popularity of this martial masculinity and a shift towards a more domestic homely masculine ideal.⁸ In light of this Sonya Rose argues for what she terms a 'temperate masculinity'⁹; a mix of the traditional 'soldier hero' and the 'little man' masculinity.¹⁰ Rose contends that the hegemonic masculinity, during the years of the Second World War, combined 'traditional' masculine traits such as bravery, courage and physical strength with more homely qualities such as being a team-player from 'ordinary' origins that enjoyed the simple pleasures of family life.¹¹ Such an image was most prominent in contemporary filmic representations of war. *In Which We Serve* (Noel Coward, 1942), *The Way to the Stars* (Anthony Asquith, 1945), *We Dive At Dawn* (Anthony Asquith, 1943) and *The Way Ahead* (Carol Reed, 1944) all focus on the war in a way which juxtaposed the hardships and dangers of military life against domestic life. However, while Rose argues that only the armed services were consistently presented in this way, this article will show that the fire services were depicted in a way which consciously mirrored this idealised depiction of the military in three main wartime cultural sources: films, radio broadcasts and visual culture. It, therefore, illustrates the dominant image of the fire services presented to the British populace. Moreover, by exploring Home Intelligence reports and firemen's writings it demonstrates that such a portrayal arguably reflected the opinions of British society. This prompts a re-examination of

our understandings of wartime masculinity. Indeed, rather than the somewhat dualistic notion of wartime masculinity previously offered the evidence of this article suggests the actuality was much more complex.

i. Firefighting and War

Before the war began, largely in light of the horrific bombings of the Spanish Civil War, there was a widespread belief that ‘the bomber will always get through.’¹² As such fire fighting was thought to be central to the predicted war effort and those who had been in a local fire service pre-war, around 5,000 to 6,000 men, were placed in reserved occupations in preparation for the predicted onslaught of aerial bombings.¹³ However, the anticipated scale of bombings meant that these numbers were thought to be insufficient to fight fires on the scale foreseen. Consequently, in 1938 the Auxiliary Fire Service (AFS) was formed to augment the existing fire fighting structure in time of war.¹⁴ Initially, fire-fighting remained organised at the local level with the Auxiliary Fire Service, as the name suggests, acting as support for the existing brigades. Most of the members of the AFS were part-time volunteers, and so kept their paid civilian work.¹⁵ In 1941 there were around 80,000 full-time members of the AFS and around 150,000 working part-time with this number remaining largely constant until these men were relieved of duty in 1944 and 1945.¹⁶ Therefore, many of the terrible and dangerous fires during the night-time Blitz were fought by men who were by day solicitors, journalists, salesmen and labourers. It was only in 1941, after the initial Blitz had passed, that the system of local brigades was nationalised and replaced the National Fire Service (NFS): a centrally organised and controlled organisation.¹⁷

The fire brigades were seemingly held in high esteem by the government. The fire service was mainly discussed in the House of Commons in terms of their remunerations, especially in regards to the danger they faced and in comparison to those in the armed

services.¹⁸ The consensus was that in light of the dangers firemen faced they were entitled to comforts, medals and payment in line with, if not equal to, those of the armed forces. A typical argument came from Conservative MP Herbert Williams in June 1943 when he declared:

There is one last point I want to raise and that is the position of members of the National Fire Service. We have the Navy, Army and the Air Force which are described as the Armed Forces of the Crown and there are all sorts of institutions which cater for their comfort, canteens and the like. I understand that up to the present members of the N.F.S. are not regarded as being eligible for consideration in Y.M.C.A. and other canteens. Now members of the N.F.S. are combatants in the real sense of the word; they have been exposed to perils of the war of the most awful type and their high standard of courage entitles them to every consideration.¹⁹

Such political argument was regularly recorded in the pages of Hansard making it evident that those in power widely considered the fire service to be comparable to the armed forces in wartime. This article explores this sentiment in wider culture.

ii. Firefighting Early in the War

The most striking aspect about the portrayal of firemen this research has uncovered is the radical changes that occurred as the war progressed. Portrayals of firemen early in the war were relatively rare. Firemen were largely absent in popular culture with only official calls for men to join the AFS generally seen.²⁰ Moreover, the few representations of the fire brigades which did appear were openly mocking in tone. One cartoon in satirical magazine *Punch* in early 1940 showed a brigade captain lecturing an AFS crew declaring ‘A pump and crew must be standing by day and night, fully equipped and ready to leave at a moment’s notice. We never know when we may be called out on a regional exercise.’²¹ Such a portrayal was an obvious attack on the men’s lack of ‘real’ action. Another similar *Punch* cartoon from the same period showed an ‘AFS lecture’ which depicted the AFS recruits taking notes as their instructor, holding a petrol can, points to their burning classroom furniture and explains

‘And here, Gentlemen, we have what is termed a fire’.²² Again, this suggests a lack of knowledge and practical experience on both the part of the recruits and those training them. What is clear from both of these portrayals is that, early in the war, the fire brigades, and the AFS in particular, were legitimate figures of fun and seen as distanced from the war. Additionally, as objects of ridicule it is clear they were not seen as overtly heroic or masculine. Such depictions seem to have reflected popular opinion as Norman Longmate reports:

The [AFS] firemen who asked in a six-year old girl who had peeped round the door of their station in Chelsea were a little taken aback when she confided in them, “My daddy says you’re a waste of public money!” The men from one London AFS station never wore uniform in the street if they could help it because of loud remarks about ‘£3 a week men doing b----- all’, and some joined the forces solely to escape such insults.²³

Again, this makes evident that early in the war the fire brigades were far distanced from the wartime masculine ideal. In this regard the AFS finds parity among the other groups of Civil defence. Lucy Noakes has shown that the state released propaganda posters, declaring Civil defence to be ‘A Real Man’s Job’, to bolster the masculine image of the men involved in work which was largely associated with women and old men.²⁴ Similarly, Penny Summerfield and Corinna Peniston-Bird’s work on the Home Guard has shown that, although more ambiguous than generally considered, many of the wartime representations showed them to be ‘playing at soldiers’ and therefore depicted as figures of fun.²⁵ Moreover, such an overtly derogatory portrayal clearly had an impact on the men of the AFS. Early in the war some AFS members resigned because of their poor treatment and low standing. Indeed, such great numbers of men discharged themselves that the government had to pass an order to forbid full-time members from resigning.²⁶ Such actions reinforce the suggestion that the AFS were considered less than manly early in the war even by the men themselves.

iii. Blitzed Heroes

As has been well documented wartime cultural identities were not fixed but instead were fluid and highly dependent on the progress of the war. For example, Martin Francis has shown that in early days of war the RAF were unpopular. Their pre-war reputation as fast-living playboys combined with their perceived inaction at Dunkirk left them with a poor public image. However, in September of 1940 public opinion performed an abrupt about turn. The Battle of Britain raised the flyers, fighter pilots in particular, to the status of heroes, the ‘few’ to whom all of Britain should show gratitude.²⁷ This exploration of Britain’s fire brigades has shown that the shift from passive to defensive warfare similarly altered their depiction. Their portrayal as layabouts and buffoons was quickly forgotten as German bombs began to drop on Britain. One contributor to an AFS anthology *Fire and Water*, a collection of writings by wartime firemen, noted:

For nine months at the beginning of the war the A.F.S. were in a parlous position, the target of all the sneers of the great unthinking. With few exceptions the press supported this glorious throng, and the references made to us were generally of a derogatory character. At last our day arrived, just as the “small thinking” had said it would, and we all went out did what we were paid to do- namely, to fight fires caused by enemy action. The G.U. (Great Unthinking) were amazed, though what they had expected us to do I cannot imagine. “The Fire Service are heroes,” they cried, and the press took up the cry in case anybody hadn’t heard. “Come in and have a cup of tea,” said all the householders. “Have this one on me,” said the Man in the Bar. “Fireman, you’re a good fellow. Yes, one of the best.”²⁸

In reality, a similar change of opinion took place for many of the branches of civil defence. Poet, novelist and AFS fireman Stephen Spender recorded in his history of civil defence that ‘the “phoney war” period was one in which the public inclined to regard Civil defence as the darts club. After that there followed the period of the blitz in which firemen, wardens and rescue workers became heroes.’²⁹ However, this dramatic shift in opinion was only widely replicated in the cultural depictions of the fire brigades. During and immediately after the Blitz firemen were depicted in a very high profile way. Although firemen only featured in

two wartime feature films, Humphrey Jennings' *Fires Were Started* (Humphrey Jennings, 1943), originally known as *I Was A Fireman*, and the Ealing comedy-drama *The Bells Go Down* (Basil Dearden, 1943), these two films both focused exclusively on firefighting and their role in the London Blitz. No such depiction was awarded to their contemporaries in ARP (Air Raid Precautions), the police or the ambulance service. Both feature films received cinema releases and were subsequently seen by large audiences.³⁰ Moreover, the fire brigades featured prominently in other media. The tabloid press, notably *The Daily Express* and *The Daily Mirror*, overtly emphasised the subject and they reflect firemen's celebrated status during the Blitz. Indeed, their status grew to such a degree that they were considered worthy of the front cover of the popular *Picture Post* in February 1941: a cover which fronted an issue which included a seven-page article regarding the dangerous and heroic work undertaken by the fire services.³¹

Only rarely during the period when Britain was under attack was the work of Britain's fire brigades subsumed within discussions of civil defence more generally. Civil defence workers, as with other wartime occupations, had their own programme broadcast by the BBC titled *Under Your Tin Hat*. The programme was 'a weekly radio magazine for A.F.S., A.R.P. and W.V.S. workers, firewatchers, and all those who guard the homes of Britain through the night.'³² Therefore, unlike other depictions of the fire services these men were depicted as part of the civil defence structure rather than a separate and singularly heroic group. The programme did emphasise the heroic status of men in civil defence for example in such features as 'Salute to Heroes' which praised men, and much less frequently women, who had received the George Medal for civilian bravery.³³ However, this feature focused equally on ARP wardens and ambulance drivers as it did men in the AFS and as such contrasts the exclusively heroic image given to the fire services elsewhere. Deviation from the uniformly heroic image of the fire brigades also came from the men of the fire services themselves.

Firemen generally eschewed heroic tales, and even the act of firefighting itself, and instead recounted simple and basic concerns, such as food, warmth and friendship.³⁴ Both *Caught* by Henry Green, who was himself an AFS fireman, and the AFS anthology *Fire and Water*, for example, focus on the pre-Blitz era and the friendships and tediums of working in a fire station, an emphasis also found in post-war recollections.³⁵ As argued by Kristine Miller, Henry Green's *Caught* also refuses to let the men presented become heroes. The Blitz is reserved for only the last twenty-five pages of the book and even then it is presented in a perfunctory manner. Furthermore, the central plot does not centre on the fire service itself but rather the kidnap of one fireman's son.³⁶ As such it somewhat subverts the typical heroic image of the fireman presented in the mainstream media. Yet as books never matched the circulation of either films or the popular press it is unlikely such an image altered the largely heroic image of the fire services.³⁷ Indeed, deviation from the singularly heroic image was rare. Even on the BBC there is some evidence to suggest they received a heroic depiction similar in style to that established in other media. For example, the BBC broadcast such programmes as *Battle of the Flames*, *Marching On* and *Into Battle* about the fire services.³⁸ The militaristic titles (and the titles are all that remain due to BBC archiving) of these programmes suggest that, as presented on screen, the fire services were allied to the armed forces.³⁹

In the period during and immediately after the Blitz it was the image of the fireman as hero, separate from other types of civilian defence, which garnered the greatest focus. Research in to this previously under-examined group of wartime workers shows that the portrayal of firemen largely conformed to the masculine ideal of 'temperate masculinity' as outlined by Sonya Rose. If we begin with the 'soldier hero' element of Rose's conceptualisation it becomes quickly apparent that firemen were largely depicted in this way. The fire services were often referred to in militaristic terms most likely in an attempt to link

them to the prestige associated with that celebrated male role. For example, *Fires Were Started* opened with reminders that ‘fires were fought’ and that ‘in the stress of battle, lessons were learned’ showing a conscious effort to link the men of the fire service to the military ideal. Furthermore, the emphasis on the bravery of the men of the fire brigades was also emphasised by the popular press. Portrayals of the fire brigades often highlighted the dangers faced and the very high price often paid by the men of the fire brigades, both of which were paralleled by the experiences of the armed services. Such stories focusing on the dangers these men routinely faced, and their similarity to military dangers, were common throughout the tabloid press and beyond. One BBC broadcast titled *War Commentary*, for example, noted ‘In their everyday life firefighters often face dangers as great as any experienced on the field of battle.’⁴⁰ Notably, *Punch*, after lampooning the AFS early in the war, began to depict them much more heroically. In September 1940, they published a realistic sketch, telling in itself as they no longer depicted the AFS in cartoon form for comedic effect. The image shows a Blitz scene of destroyed buildings and flames. In the foreground, two firemen are tackling the blaze by plying water from their hoses; in the middle distance, a fireman helps an elderly woman through the rubble; and in the background, other firemen are depicted at work. The caption to the image, ‘The Front Line’, equates the fire brigade with the military in the dangers they faced and, therefore, also the prestige they received.⁴¹

However, all wartime occupations, and civilian undertakings, were linked to the war effort in this way. Even housewives were told they were fighting on the kitchen front. It is widely accepted that the lines between civilian and combatant were blurred during the war and it is commonly cited that between Dunkirk and D-Day more British civilians died than military men.⁴² However, as Lucy Noakes argues, most of these civilians were essentially passive victims.⁴³ The fire services were, although technically in passive non-combatant civil defence roles, active participants in warfare. Unlike their counterparts in more sedate civilian

occupations men of the fire services behaved in ways which reinforced, rather than distanced them from, comparisons to the heroic ideal. For example, unlike the most famous of civil defence organisations, the Home Guard, the fire services were used in their wartime capacity and so transcended from fools to heroes. Spaces inhabited as well as actions undertaken are also central. While the ordinary civilian was encouraged to shelter during air raids the men of the fire services were duty-bound to head out in to a world of burning buildings and falling bombs. Representations of the fire services often centred on their bravery in such situations. For example, in both *The Bells Go Down* and *Fires Were Started* the firemen are shown rushing up stairs and ladders without any visible hesitancy to fight fires. This is emphasised in *Fires Were Started* as Humphrey Jennings included many shots of the firemen standing with determined and resolute expressions on their faces with fires raging all around them. This bravery was acknowledged at the time. In a review of *Fires Were Started*, *The Times* noted: 'it is a night terror which does not terrorise those whose duty it is to be abroad in it.'⁴⁴ Such a brave and heroic image was generally reserved for the armed services. Stories of the brave tales of those who risked life and limb to defend Britain were common at this time. Films, especially, which depicted the military often showed the men involved shrugging off the dangers which beset them. For example, in *In Which We Serve* (Noël Coward, 1942) Captain Kinross, played by Noël Coward, informs his men very calmly after they have been torpedoed that 'we got him. I'm afraid he got us too... I'm afraid we're going over.' Such emotional reticence, and fortitude in the face of danger, was common in depictions of the military in this period and served to underline the bravery of the military men despite the dangers which beset them. As such, the parallels in the portrayal of the fire services and the military hero are clear.

The parallels between the fire services and the armed services were made equally explicit in other ways. In the 1943 Ealing comedy-drama *The Bells Go Down*, for example,

the men of the fire service are largely depicted as the equals of those in the armed services. As depicted in the film, during the ‘phoney war’, the army would not accept recruits. In response two of the film’s central characters, Bob and Tommy, join the AFS as a legitimate alternative. During training the fire station chief informs the new recruits:

You’ve got to learn discipline. Its discipline that makes a good army or a good ship’s crew and its discipline that makes a good fire-fighter. You’ve got to know your equipment inside-out. You’ve got to know the trick of it... In the light and in the dark. So when the time comes you know it like a soldier knows his rifle.

This speech was clearly designed to invite comparisons between firefighting and the known rigours of life in the armed forces. Such depictions were similarly shown in other media. For example, in December 1941 *The Daily Mirror* published an article entitled ‘The Happy Warriors’ which depicted a naval officer and an AFS firefighter receiving their Christmas presents in hospital. Both had serious injuries to their legs and were depicted side by side, with their stories intertwined.⁴⁵ This served to emphasise the parallels between both the bravery and the fates of those in the military and the fire services – something which is reinforced by the headline proclaiming them both to be ‘warriors’. Additionally, a strong link was often made between the fire service and militarily winning the war. For example, in *Fires Were Started* the men work all night to prevent a ship from catching fire. At both the beginning and the end of the film the ship is shown being loaded with artillery guns and boxes of ammunitions. The significance of these shots is reinforced at the end of the film by a brief scene where the captain is seen making a call to inform an unknown person that ‘No we weren’t hit. We’ll make it on time.’ The production notes show that the intention to have them saving military equipment was a conscious one.⁴⁶ The combined effect of these depictions is that the fire service was shown in a heroic light, likened to the armed forces and as essential to the war-effort.

Similarly, the fire services were also shown to be a maker of ‘men’ just like the armed forces were perceived to be.⁴⁷ For example, the 1944 David Niven film *The Way Ahead* focuses on a group of army conscripts as they are turned from ordinary civilians to fighting men. Although the film leaves the fate of the men it portrays unclear it does show them to be adept soldiers willing to face death, a far cry from the complaining recruits they were as the film began. *The Bells Go Down* displays a remarkably similar narrative structure. Early in the film Tommy tells Ted, the London Fire Brigade fireman in charge of training the AFS recruits, ‘Your old man told us you needed men in the fire brigade.’ Ted replies ‘We got men in the fire brigade. But they seem to be taking almost anything in the AFS.’ Such disunity does reflect reality. Men of the regular fire brigades were distrustful of the men of AFS with regards to their skills and their ambitions within the fire service.⁴⁸ As Connell argues, masculinity is experienced hierarchically.⁴⁹ In the war years those in the armed forces were certainly viewed to be at the apex. *The Bells Go Down* shows that early in the war those in the AFS were considered to be far down in that hierarchy, a depiction supported by the actual depiction of the AFS before the Blitz. This insinuation that the AFS recruits were less manly than their London Fire Brigade counterparts is developed throughout *The Bells Go Down*. The character of Tommy continually refuses to take firefighting seriously and is shown skipping, while imitating a little girl, and sliding down the firemen’s pole for fun. Furthermore, when he is late for a fire, and appears in his pyjamas and slippers he argues that ‘well someone might have wakened me’ to which Ted replies ‘We don’t provide nannies. Not even for little boys in the AFS.’ This suggestion of the AFS being ‘little boys’, emphasised by Tommy’s pyjamas, suggests that those in the AFS were not manly. This is only resolved on the first night of the Blitz, when the AFS were properly tested for the first time and they were able to prove themselves. The night ends with Tommy being fatally crushed by a wall while attempting to save the Station Chief, an act which cements his place as a ‘man’.

Tommy has finally earned the respect of Ted, who tells his mother ‘I was up there. You ought to feel proud.’ This active focus on the forging and production of ‘men’ again likens the fire service to the portrayal of those in the armed forces.

As well as implications of heroism the fire services were often explicitly stated to be heroes. For example, in the *The Bells Go Down*. The film has one lengthy, and unusual, scene where a drunken soldier questions why firemen got ‘three quid a week for keeping out of the army.’ This scene predates the Blitz and thus depicts a time before firemen had been called upon in a war capacity. This inactivity results in some of the film’s firemen feeling ineffectual. Bob explains ‘well he’s right. We haven’t done anything really.’ However, after some debate the scene ends with Brookes, one of the firemen and a former volunteer of the International Brigade who had been on active service in Spain during the Civil War, explaining that: ‘Our cities are still behind the lines. When someone starts to pin medals on us it’ll mean they’ve moved right up to the front. It’ll mean another Rotterdam, another Warsaw right here in England. They’ll call us heroes if it came to that. I’d rather they went on laughing.’ The meaning of this short speech would likely have been obvious to the film’s audience – they would have been well aware that British cities had been bombed and that firemen had been called upon to act as heroes. This scene is unusual as, rather than stating the importance of the fire service on its own terms, it pits the role of a civilian occupation against the ideal masculine role of the armed forces. Perhaps one explanation for this is that the producers of the film assumed that the comparison would be favourable, based on both the outcome of the film as well as the viewing public’s knowledge of the heroic deeds performed by firemen during the Blitz. Such a depiction therefore linked the fire services to the prestige more readily associated with the armed forces.

This heroic image was cemented in other media. Artist Bernard Hailstone, also an AFS fireman, painted many portraits of the men, and less frequently women, of the fire

brigades including his portraits of Frederick Charles Reville and Andrew Nures Nabaro, both winners of the George Medal for civilian bravery.⁵⁰ Both paintings are extremely similar to military portraits and show men in uniform with their helmets under one arm while stood against a plain background. Indeed, other than the specific uniform worn there is very little to distinguish these portraits from conventional military portraits. What this perhaps suggests is that in undertaking confirmed acts of bravery, for which they had been awarded medals, it was deemed appropriate to depict them in a way analogous to the military ideal. This hints at the high esteem which the fire services were held in at the height of the Blitz. The meaning of the military-style portraits is also underlined by the fact that Hailstone did not depict women in the same way. For example, Hailstone's portrait of Barbara Mary Rendell, a member of the AFS and winner of the British Empire Medal awarded to civilians for their bravery, shows her seated at her desk.⁵¹ She is clearly at work and her demure seated position is more reminiscent of traditional portraits of women than a person who has undertaken an act of bravery worthy of commendation. Moreover, the inclusion of a telephone links her firmly to the administrative work which was the task ascribed to women in the fire services and so reinforces her femininity by connecting her to the more conventional female role of secretary or clerical worker. Perhaps this was Hailstone's attempt to reinforce her femininity despite her actions which defied gender stereotypes. This is underlined by her well-kept hair and red lipstick. What this highlights is the differing meanings of dangerous actions for men and women. A woman had transgressed gender boundaries by performing brave actions under enemy fire and was therefore depicted in an acceptably feminine way. However, men undertaking similarly brave acts were elevated to the same status as the most lauded section of society: the military.

iv. Ordinary Heroes

Sonya Rose's conceptualisation of the 'temperate hero' emphasises that the soldier hero was also an ordinary British man. Culturally there was great focus on friendship, kindness and domesticity. For example, in the idealised image of the armed forces there was much emphasis on comradeship. It was a common trope in war films, most notably, to portray the presented group as sharing initial antagonisms, usually out with battle, before pulling together seamlessly when necessary. For example, in the 1943 film *We Dive at Dawn*, Eric Portman's character, Hobson, is universally disliked by the crew of his submarine for his morose and pessimistic attitude: an attitude seemingly reciprocated by Hobson himself. However, in the denouement it is Hobson alone who risks his life by posing as a Nazi soldier then fighting off a number of real German soldiers to ensure the crew has enough fuel and supplies to return to port in Britain. This research has revealed that similar emphasis was found in the depictions of the fire service. In both *Fires Were Started* and *The Bells Go Down* one fireman sacrifices his life to save, or in an attempt to save, one of his friends. In *Fires Were Started* Jacko persuades Barrett to leave him on a burning roof and save himself despite Jacko knowing that there is a chance that it might result in his own death, which it does when the roof collapses. This sacrifice is poignantly underlined later in the film when Barrett finds Jacko's dented and broken helmet. As he looks down at the helmet in his hands, sombre but dramatic music plays, serving to draw the viewer's attention to the sacrifices made by the fire service. The subsequent funeral reinforces the military imagery. Six men in uniform carry a coffin draped in a Union Flag while bugle music sounds in the background. It is almost entirely indistinguishable from a military funeral. Death on duty was something experienced primarily by the armed forces and so dying on duty not only reminded the audience of the sacrifices that were made by firemen but also suggests they were akin to the armed services. Death is similarly present in *The Bells Go Down*. Clownish Tommy attempts to rescue the

station chief, who is trapped under some rubble, despite the pair having previously shared a mutual dislike, therefore mirroring the narrative structure usually applied to the military. Both Tommy and the Chief are crushed by a falling wall. Such sacrifice was a key trope of ‘the people’s war’ and was regularly seen in popular culture. For example, in *Went the Day Well?* (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1942), an Ealing drama depicting an imagined Nazi invasion of a sleepy English village, the lady of the manor sacrifices herself by rushing from the room with a live hand-grenade in order to save the working-class cockney evacuees in the room. As such the self-sacrificial actions of the firemen underline their status as truly British ‘ordinary’ heroes. Moreover, this sacrifice was not always life itself. In *The Bells Go Down*, the young fireman Bob has to let his own home burn down, a home the viewer has seen him lovingly create with his new wife and colleagues, in order to save a warehouse full of essential war supplies. This again highlights the level of sacrifice made by members of the fire service which has direct parallels to those sacrifices made by the armed forces: loss of home comforts and more pointedly the sacrifice of life for one’s country and its inhabitants. These actions cumulatively underline the levels of comradeship and sacrifice displayed by the fire service and again likens them to the idealised construction of the armed forces in which sacrifice and unit cohesion were central to cultural representations.

Moreover, men of the fire service were regularly depicted in domestic settings therefore cementing their ‘ordinary hero’ status which was similarly conferred upon the armed man. Even out with their work, where they were frequently shown rescuing children and the elderly, these men were often represented as ordinary and kind. For example, they were often depicted on their wedding days or with their wives.⁵² In *Fires Were Started* one of the firemen, Johnny, is shown play-fighting with his son before he goes to work. Similarly, one memorable photograph in *The Daily Mirror* shows four firemen, in full uniform and one dressed as a clown, at a tiny children’s table wearing party hats surrounded by children. The

accompanying article explains that these are the children of their dead colleagues. The article also explains that the men have made them toys.⁵³ This article therefore neatly encapsulates both sides of Rose's conceptualisation. By emphasising the care these men have taken of the children it captures the 'ordinary' aspect of the conceptualisation. However, by also focusing on their dead comrades it reminds the reader of the sacrifices made by the fire services and so reinforces the links with the armed forces ideal as discussed above.

However, this heroic depiction was largely centred on the London fire services. Newspapers from out with the capital created a more regional view which mirrored the representation of London's firemen but this was not recreated widely.⁵⁴ While for example Clydebanks, Coventry, Manchester and Birmingham were all bombed, and therefore burned, the fire brigades of these cities were rarely mentioned in mainstream culture and were certainly never given the heroic image afforded to the firemen of the capital. Yet this image is largely understandable given that London, as well as being the epicentre of British media, attracted the most prolonged bouts of attack. However, there were varied efforts to depict the men of the fire services as fundamentally British heroes. While the overwhelming focus on firemen centred on London there were concerted attempts to show the men of the fire service to be British, not just Londoners, as well as from all social classes. *Fires Were Started* and *The Bells Go Down* both include a selection of English accents, with a range of regional accents and social classes, as well as at least one Welsh and Scottish character therefore attempting to create an image of the entire nation working together against the Luftwaffe's onslaught, a device also used in the depiction of the merchant service, female industrial workers and the ATS.⁵⁵

Moreover, they were shown to have traits readily associated with the idealised British citizen. For example, firemen were often depicted as stoic. The men themselves often

belittled and undermined the danger they were in. In the anonymously published memoir *The Bells Go Down* (on which the film of the same name was loosely based), the author noted:

I remember being on the D.P. [a pump] and seeing the A.A. [anti-aircraft shell] bursting overhead, and knowing full well that the shrapnel must be coming down in tons and that the bombs might be expected any minute – and I thought to myself: ‘Well I don’t really care anymore. I’ll get killed sometime to-night, so what matter when.’ So I just went on working and pouring the water in to the fire.⁵⁶

Such images were replicated in more widely seen depictions. For instance, in *Fires Were Started* a bomb explodes while the men are fighting a fire. In response, all the men fall flat to the floor. As they stand up one of the men, Rumbold, laughs and exclaims ‘what a windy lot of bastards we are. That was a mile away’. The men even remain in high spirits the following morning after a full night fighting fires and despite having lost a colleague. After Johnny calls the canteen girl ‘beautiful’, one of the men, referring to Johnny’s soot-blackened face, retorts ‘You look pretty beautiful yourself too mate’ which leads the assembled group to laugh jovially. As Penny Summerfield and Corinna Peniston-Bird argue ‘the British love of self-deprecating humour was construed during the war and afterwards as “a precious gift”, “the very life-blood of democracy”.’⁵⁷ Therefore, such appearances of ‘smiling through’ aligned the fire services with the idealised image of the British citizen.

Moreover, a key component of ‘the people’s war’ rhetoric was the ordinariness of civilians who could make an extraordinary difference to the war effort. Despite being a supposedly inclusory trope the idea of the ‘people’ could often be very specific. The ‘people’ were usually constructed as working or lower-middle class.⁵⁸ Many prominent AFS members, such as Stephen Spender and Henry Green, were artists from upper middle class families. However, such men were never the main focus of fire brigade propaganda which instead chose to focus on unremarkable or obviously working class men as shown in both *Fires Were Started* and *The Bells Go Down*. Such an image was compounded by the fact that there was an overwhelming focus on the AFS especially on film. Despite both *Fires Were*

Started and *The Bells Go Down* being released in 1943, two years after the creation of the NFS, both films focus on much earlier periods of the war. While this may largely have been to centre the film's narrative on the Blitz, the period in which firemen's role in the war was most crucial, it also has the effect of focusing on the AFS and the connotations of the heroics of the ordinary man which that brought. This appears to be something the Crown Film Unit, the film production company for *Fires Were Started*, were keen to stress. Promotional materials, for example, for the film stated:

The Cast, who as already mentioned, are all members of the fire service, were picked as representative types from every part of the country: the principal parts are played by Leading Fireman F.W. Griffiths, a cockney taxi-driver who joined the A.F.S. before the war; Leading Fireman Phillip Wilson-Dickson, previously employed in an advertising agency; Leading Fireman Loris Rey, a brilliant sculptor who has frequently exhibited at the Royal Academy; Firemen T.P. Smith, formerly a waiter; Firemen John Barker, a Manchester Business Man, and Company Officer George Gravett, a regular London Fire Brigade man.⁵⁹

This focus on these men's pre-war roles shows them to be average men as well as heroes and as such places them firmly within Rose's conceptualisation of the ordinary hero.

v. Gender Relationships

The fire service did not remain a singularly male endeavour in wartime. Instead, women were used to undertake some of the necessary tasks. While the most dangerous job of actually fighting fires was always undertaken by men, women were generally used as telephonists, therefore largely conforming to traditional gender roles. Such gendering of tasks was typical across the entire civil defence structure.⁶⁰ In addition, they were also employed in the more hazardous job of despatch rider, for example, which took them to the heart of the Blitz. Such jobs were only infrequently referenced culturally. The BBC, with its emphasis on reportage, was one of the few media producers to do so, and then only infrequently. For example, on 18

June 1941 during the 'Salute to Heroes' feature on the BBC's civil defence programme

Under Your Tin Hat the following story was told of a female volunteer for the AFS:

On the night of November 14th during a severe enemy attack on Coventry, Marjorie Perkins was engaged in the Works surgery and on two occasions was blown off her feet by blast and rendered unconscious. On recovery, she continued to render First Aid to injured work people, visiting shelters and other parts of the works to do this, regardless of raging fires and falling H.E. [High Explosive] bombs. Marjorie Perkins showed an outstanding example of bravery.⁶¹

While Marjorie was undertaking what could have been seen as a traditionally female role, tending to the wounded, her actions of continuing despite injury and in the face of fire and bombing blur this gender stereotype. Such radio depictions allowed women to undertake brave and courageous acts in their own right, undermining the idea of the heroic actions of the fire service as being solely the preserve of the manly hero.

However, women played a much more prominent role in the BBC's depiction of civil defence than in other media. As with other wartime endeavours, there was a conscious effort to maintain a feminine identity for women pushed in to undertaking work which had previously been considered male as seen in such films as *Millions Like Us* (Sidney Gilliat and Frank Launder, 1943) and *The Gentle Sex* (Lesley Howard, 1943). Filmically, most notably, roles within the AFS were more delineated along gender lines. In the widely seen depictions in both *The Bells Go Down* and *Fires Were Started*, the main task of the female fire fighters appears to have been to answer the phone and, in the case of *The Bells Go Down*, to provide a love interest. Indeed, Susie the only female fire fighter focused upon in *The Bells Go Down*, joined the Fire Service to be near to her boyfriend. Moreover, when suspecting her boyfriend's parents of being trapped under rubble Susie uses her feminine wiles, by pretending to hear shouts, to get a male ARP warden to dig rather than attempt any rescue of her own therefore conforming to stereotypical gender roles.

Women, despite some suggestions of female bravery on the BBC, were much more prominently represented in such a way as to reinforce, rather than upset, conventional gender roles: they were generally shown assisting men as they took on the more dangerous role of fighting fires therefore cementing the fire services' image as manly heroes. Indeed, it is likely that it was this strictly gendered image which allowed, in part, the fire services their portrayal as civil defence heroes. The Home Guard were never called upon to act in their official capacity while Air Raid Precautions wardens lacked the consistently brave actions for heroic portrayal. Similarly, while the ambulance service could have potentially matched the fire services in terms of heroic deeds they were perhaps too associated with civilian injury and death to be overly focused upon culturally. Moreover, the both the ambulance service and the ARP were less obviously gendered with women often at the heart of bombing raids performing their duties. An image of women in such obviously dangerous situations would likely have been unacceptable and so culturally left the fire services as the sole heroic civil defence group. Their work could easily be heroic but as easily could be distanced from the human casualties of the Blitz and, perhaps most importantly, their work was acceptably gendered.

vi. Firefighting after the Blitz

Despite the high praise and heroic image of the fire service during and immediately after the Blitz this image was not to last. It is telling that the two most prominent depictions of the fire service in war, the films *The Bells Go Down* and *Fires Were Started*, were released very close together in 1943. Both were conceived shortly after the Blitz had ceased and, due to the long production times associated with making feature films, appeared on screen only in 1943.⁶² As such they form a high point in public interest in the exploits of the fire service. After the release of these films the cultural depictions, on all media, of the fire service declined to

almost nothing. This may be attributable to the fact that after the intense bombing of the Blitz, firefighting was no longer the essential job it once had been and so naturally merited less emphasis in the media. Despite the resurgence of bombing in 1944 with the V-1 and V-2 bombings of London and the south-east the fireman did not re-emerge as a heroic figure. This was most likely due to the increased overseas military action of the war after this date which shifted attention from the home front to the battle front. Such disinterest and apathy was largely reflected in the opinions of the British public. For example, in August 1943 it was reported in Home Intelligence reports that numerous complaints were received with regards to the NFS that 'large numbers of young men are employed on trivial work.'⁶³ This suggests not only that the fire service in general were no longer considered to be doing vital and dangerous work but also reinforces the popular idea that young men, especially, should be gainfully employed, presumably ideally in the armed services, while the country was at war and therefore mirrors arguments generally directed at more sedate civilian occupations. Similarly, in autumn 1944 due to the heavily decreased threat of air raids the NFS were combed out and again Home Intelligence reports suggest that such a move was welcome by the public 'due to their long period of inactivity'.⁶⁴ This again, suggested that despite their earlier heroic depictions, the British public no longer viewed firemen in the same way. Ultimately, the fire services' depiction as heroes was widely drawn from their actions while Britain was under heavy attack from the German Luftwaffe. When the attack ceased, so did their necessity and, indeed their heroic status.

vii. Conclusion

It is clear that at the height of the Blitz, and the period immediately afterwards, the men of Britain's fire services were overwhelmingly depicted, despite the emphasis of the firemen themselves and some BBC broadcasts, as heroes separate from the rest of the civil defence

structure. Moreover, this heroic representation was very similar to the depiction more regularly associated with the armed forces. The men of the fire services were similarly portrayed as brave, courageous and subject to extreme danger in the course of their duties. Such comparisons between the fire services and the armed forces were often made explicit and therefore linked the fire service with the prestigious image more generally given to the man in military uniform. Furthermore, as well as being somewhat 'soldierly' in their depictions the men of the fire services were also shown with more temperate qualities: they had strong bonds to their mates and were often displayed in a domestic setting therefore creating an image of ordinary British men. This was emphasised by their typical British traits and a focus on men from all corners of the British Isles. Indeed, they were the ideal symbol for 'the people's war'. The AFS in particular held connotations of ordinary men doing extraordinary deeds in times of war. Such an image was further cemented as the work was largely gendered therefore making them the most prominent of civil defence occupations and the only one to be truly portrayed as heroes. However, such an image was not sustained after the Blitz. Interest and depictions of the service diminished sharply and left the men of the services distanced from their previous heroic depictions. The research presented here suggests that Sonya Rose's conceptualisation of 'temperate masculinity' holds true for the portrayal of British heroes during the Second World War. However, we need to expand our understandings of which wartime groupings were categorised as 'heroes'. Sonya Rose, states that:

For men to be judged as good citizens, they needed to demonstrate their virtue by being visibly in the military. It was only then that the components of hegemonic masculinity could cohere. It is no wonder then that male workers on the home front likened themselves to battle heroes while attempting to make the case that their contributions to the nation and those of men in the armed services were equivalent.⁶⁵

However, the new research presented here somewhat upsets this neat dichotomy. Firemen rarely, if ever, depicted themselves as anything like heroes. However, they were quite clearly

culturally constructed as such. Firemen, however briefly, were heroes and the equals of fighting men. Therefore, by examining this under-researched, but vital, wartime group this article has shown that wartime masculinity was not as binary as formerly argued and rather the line between combatant and civilian was more fluid than previously thought. Ultimately, the fireman's fleeting laudation demonstrates bravery under enemy fire could confer the desired status of 'hero' in wartime, marking that as the clear measure of British masculine validity during the war years.

Notes

1. HC Deb 20 May 1941 vol. 371 cc1421-22.
2. This is enshrined on the National Firefighters Memorial near St Pauls Cathedral in London.
3. Beckett, *Firefighting and the Blitz*, 1.
04. Wallington, *Firemen at War*.
5. Rose, *Which People's War?*, 162.
6. Summerfield, 'Divisions at Sea'; Noakes, 'Serve to Save'; Summerfield, and Peniston-Bird, *Contesting Home Defence*.
7. Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*, 1.
8. A. Light, *Forever England*, 8.
9. Rose, *Which People's War?*, 153.
10. Light, *Forever England*.
11. Rose, *Which People's War?*, 160-1.
12. Spender, *Citizens In War*, 17.
13. HC Deb 20 May 1941 vol. 371 cc1416-7.
14. Wallington, *Firemen at War*, 6.

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15. Ibid, 6.
 16. HC Deb 20 May 1941 vol. 371 cc1413-79.
 17. HC Deb 20 May 1941 vol. 371 cc1413.
 18. HC Deb 20 May 1941 vol 371 cc1461-62.
 19. HC Deb 30 June 1943 vol 390 cc1685-6.
 20. For example Frank Newbould, 'AFS London needs auxiliary firemen now', (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London).
 - 21 *Punch*, 5 June 1940.
 22. *Punch*, 28 February 1940.
 23. Longmate, *How We Lived Then*, 97.
 24. Noakes, 'Serve to Save', 745.
 25. Summerfield and Peniston-Bird, *Contesting Home Defence*, 134.
 26. Wallington, *Firemen at War*, 47.
 27. Francis, *The Flyer*, 17.
 28. Sharples, 'Brighton', 201.
 29. Spender, *Citizens In War*, 33.
 30. Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, 40.
 31. *Picture Post*, 1 February 1941.
 32. BBC Written Archive Centre, *Under Your Tin Hat*, 11 June 1941.
 33. BBC Written Archive Centre, *Under Your Tin Hat*, 18 June 1941.
 34. Dessau, 'The Passing of the Exmouth, Ingham', 106-19.
 35. Ingham, *Fire and Water*; Green, *Caught* and Helen Jones, 'Civil defence in Britain, 1938 – 1945', 129.
 36. Miller, *British Literature of the Blitz*, 98-9.
 37. Lant, *Blackout*, 24; Mass Observation Archive- Topic Collection 20-4-E. An estimated 30 million people a week visited the cinema during the war (up from 19 million a week). In

contrast reading levels, never at this level, decreased in wartime due to time constraints and paper shortages.

38. BBC Written Archive Centre. R34/689/1 Policy Propaganda Labour 1941, 1945-6.

39. The BBC did not archive recordings and many of the scripts of this period are no longer extant.

40. BBC Written Archive Centre, *War Commentary by J.L. Hodson*, 1 October 1942.

41. *Punch*, 25 September 1940.

42. Jones, *British Civilians in the Front Line*, 197.

43. Noakes, 'Serve to Save', 739.

44. *The Times*, 25 March 1943.

45. *The Daily Mirror*, 27 December 1941.

46. National Archives, INF 5/88.

47. Hockey, 'No More Heroes', 15.

48. Ewen, *Fighting Fires*, 113. In this way the portrayal of the fire services, probably unintentionally, reflected the reality of life in the armed services with notable discord recorded between the regular soldiers and the conscript army.

49. Connell, *The Men and the Boys*, 10.

50. Bernard Hailstone, 'Andrew Nures Nabarro, GM, Leading Fireman, Portsmouth AFS', 1941 (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London); Bernard Hailstone, 'Frank Charles Reville, GM: Bristol AFS', 1941 (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London).

51. Bernard Hailstone, 'Barbara Mary Rendell, BEM, AFS', 1941 (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London).

52. *The Daily Mirror*, 15 September 1941.

53. *The Daily Mirror*, 4 July 1944.

54. For example one newspaper declared : 'Fire-fighting under raiders' machine-gun bullets: firemen's gallantry in Welsh Town' – *Manchester Guardian*, 22 August 1940. Similarly: 'They tackled fires as if trained to the job from their youth. They ignored perils and hazards. I have nothing but praise for their heroism.' in *The Scotsman* – 15 March 1941.

55. Summerfield and Peniston-Bird, *Contesting Home Defence*, 104.

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56. Anon., *The Bells Go Down*, 94.
57. Summerfield and Peniston-Bird, *Contesting Home Defence*, 134.
58. Rose, *Which People's War?*, 109
59. National Archives, INF 6/985.
60. Noakes and Grayzel 'Defending the Home(land)', 33.
61. BBC Written Archive Centre, *Under Your Tin Hat*, 18 June 1941.
62. National Archives, INF 5/88. Discussions for *Fires Were Started* began in December 1941. The producers were also aware that by November 1942 Ealing had almost completed *The Bells Go Down*.
63. National Archives, CAB 121/106.
64. National Archives, CAB 121/107.
65. Rose, *Which People's War?*, 196.

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