

## The Ladies Bridge Transcript

### Chapter 1 01:00:01:05

#### **Vox pop:**

I've lived in London all my life, right through the war years, and I've always referred to it as Waterloo Bridge, never as the ladies bridge.

#### **Vox pop:**

Ladies Bridge? Yes, have you heard it being called the ladies bridge, No never!

**War propaganda:** Now look at these pictures you women war workers and you men too.

**Riverboat man:** Now we're just approaching Waterloo Bridge. Now this was built mainly by female labour during the Second World War, this is why we call it the ladies bridge.

And if it wasn't for the ladies in this country, this country would have fallen into disrepair.

#### **Radio Sandi Toksvig:**

I'm delighted because it's a story I'd heard a little bit about, but didn't know a huge amount about, it was actually nicknamed the ladies bridge?

Karen and Chris on radio

Waterloo Bridge was rebuilt by women during the second world war, there's actually no historical written evidence about it, no-ones documented it, and what we're trying to do is celebrate the fact there were many thousands of women working in construction during the second world war but it's an untold story.

#### **Lady Platt:**

We are taken onto the bridge as Cambridge undergraduates, I certainly don't remember seeing any women. There were several houses in Blackfriars house of notable repute. So we took the view that it was the ladies of the night.

I went to St Johns school just by the bridge but I cannot remember seeing women working on the bridge.

(2 lines from Waterloo sunset- dirty Old River----night)

#### **Chris:**

I came to London in the late 70's and managed to get on a training course, to train as a carpenter and joiner, and we thought we were pioneers we thought we were the first women to have done this, but only 35 years previous there were thousands and thousands of women doing building trades, but there was no trace of these women, there were no photographs, there was nothing, no history about these women apart from the story kept alive by the river boatmen about the women who built Waterloo bridge

### Chapter 2 01:02:44:08

#### **Jane Brown changes her Job**

Until a few months ago I was carrying on with my peacetime job in an office. One day whilst my boss was phoning, I noticed an advertisement in his newspaper; it said, "Give us the planes and bombs we want" Although I wasn't due for **call up for some time**, I decided I'd go to the labour exchange the same day.

#### **Sophie:**

There were jobs galore, there were absolutely jobs galore, you could go anywhere, as a woman as well, yeah. Cos all the men were away or doing their national service, they were crying out.

#### **War propaganda:**

With complete confidence girls have taken on the work, even when it is heavy, they do it with a will and enable the train services to run on time and up to schedule.

#### **Reenie:**

And I took a job that a man did, they used to book freight on the shipping lines and they said to me I could do this job, but told me as soon as the man came back I'd have to leave the job and take on something lesser really.

#### **War propaganda:**

The farther you go into the war industry the more surprised you are by the things now being done by women, they even operate the steam hammer.

?

I got a job over Smithfield meat market, union cold storage it was, I was a laboratory assistant. Ooh that was posh, very posh.

#### **War propaganda:**

And thousands have joined the picturesque land army, to put under acreage...

I liked the uniform, the land army uniform was oh quite glamorous, it was quite glamorous.

**Lady Platt:**

I had a letter form the government, saying there were 6 subjects, 1 of the subjects was aeronautics, so I took a leap in the dark, to find I was 1 of 5 girls doing engineering, much later on we discovered there'd only been 9 ever before.

**War propaganda:**

It wasn't long before Mary and I were entering the factory for work. All the glass in the windows had been taken away for safety and the factory blacked out.

**Lady Platt:**

I arrived in the experimental flight test department at Langley, and you could see by the look in the men's eyes, ouch! My god there's a war on and we've got a women engineer too! So I couldn't ever let anyone down.

**War propaganda:**

As it flew off I felt I was answering that pilot in the advertisement, helping to give him and the rest the planes they need and I know other girls are helping to give them bombs and ammunition, but many more women are needed if all the jobs are to be done properly, and the training centres are there to show how.

**Chris:**

So we all know about the women who worked on the trams and railways and the buses in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> world war, but nothing about construction, they just leave out the construction industry.

**Chapter 3 01:05:49:07**

**Robert elms**

Lets go back to Waterloo Bridge a bit, why was it knocked down in the 1<sup>st</sup> place, tell us the story  
There was a buckle that appeared on the north side of the bridge, it had like a bit of a hill, they built a temporary bridge and then in 1939 they started working on the rebuilding of the bridge.

**Chris:**

There was this acute labour crisis that happened in 1939 when all the Irish concrete workers who were working on the bridge disappeared overnight they all went back to Ireland, when war was declared.  
But the craft trade unions were really resistant to women coming in whatsoever. The construction company argued for more time and more money because of their particular labour problems, they used this phrase we've utilized every type of labour possible, green labour which is unskilled, they actually say we've had to use women for god sakes.

Sirens

**Lady Platt:**

1941 was at the depths of despair about the war, I mean the only thing that kept us going was Churchill saying we're going to win,  
But we had no allies.

I first came across evidence that women had worked in significant numbers going through the labour gazette and I discovered there were 1000's and 1000's of women that entered the building industry in 1941.

So the agreement with the government during the war years was to let women in on a temporary basis and also insisted that they were paid far less than men.

**War propaganda:**

There's not much that women can't do!  
This is a salute to women in war work.  
In the steel industry women carry cradles of molten metal.

**Edith**

I'd be standing like this welding with a gun.  
We didn't have the all the modern stuff that they've got now...

**War propaganda:**

No job could require more care than this as obviously a slip on the part of the crane driver could result in a nasty accident.

**Edith**

I'd look down and my trousers would be alight.

**War propaganda:**

Till now the women in heavy industry and been out of the limelight, let that be no longer. Let us now see that the proper praise is given to them and coupled with them the score of women who do the thankless jobs left vacant by the men who fight.

**Edith**

So while you're welding you mustn't dare look either way. No no, and they'd say give us I of her fags, give us I of her fags, and I could hear all this, you had to carry your bag about with you wherever you went.

**Chris:**

By 1944 there were around 25,000 women working in the construction industry, literally I couldn't believe when I saw the records.

Singing- don't fence me in

**Chris:**

For me that was the most exciting find, finding these photographs in the imperial war museum, and finding photos of women doing building work all across the trades from labouring, concrete workers, up to the skilled trades carpenters and joiners, brick-layers and there they all were.

Singing- don't fence me in

**Chris:**

Then because it was building of strategic importance there was absolute censorship on all news about the bridge. There are some wonderful photographs from the London metropolitan archives about the building of the bridge up until 1939.

**Sandi:**

There must be, I'm just thinking if you spent between 1942 to 1945 working on the bridge, and you were there the day it was finished, there's got to be photos of women standing there going look what we did. There must be somewhere, are they not in an archive?

**Peter Mandell:**

The difficulty with the Peter Lind records were that when the company went into liquidation in the late 1980's , a lot of their information was kept or pillaged by people who wanted a keepsake of their time with Peter Lind. But it was generally well known, that anecdotally if you like that there were women working, and in fact names of a particular lady was given to me at the time and there was mention of the fact that she lived in a place called Halton Regis, and the reason I've remembered that but not here name unfortunately is because I used to live nearby...

**Chapter 4 bridge with construction sounds 01:10:33:16**

Waterloo Bridge opening

Performing the ceremony is **Mr Herbert Morrison**

I am very very glad this morning to open the new Waterloo Bridge,

I will proceed to cut the tape and to declare the new Waterloo Bridge to be open.

The bridge was still on timber supports when the war began after more than 20 air raid incidents, its 6 traffic lanes were ready for use by the end of last year.

At the opening of the bridge in fact the formal opening was in 1945, and Herbert Morrison made a very sort of rousing speech in which he thanked the fortunate men who built this bridge, NO! Yes. Really, no mention of the women at all, absolutely none, written out completely.

"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."

It now remains us to keep in mind what Herbert Morrison said. Keep it white he says, its whiteness is one of its glories."

**Woman:**

I would have had something to say if I wasn't mentioned and I'd helped to build it.! Even though the women worked during the war it was still a mans world.

**River boatmen**

I've been on the river Thames all me life, been nowhere else, my occupation is taking sightseers on the river Thames.

I tell them that this is the waterloo road bridge but we all call it the ladies bridge cos it was actually built by 65% of female labour during the Second World War.

Some say 90% some say 85%, but in a national newspaper it was said it was over 70% female labour that built the bridge.

Sometimes I also say this was built by the ladies of London, and I'm amazed its still standing and I usually get a few boos.

**Jane:**

Everything was so hush hush, You talking about the waterloo bridge, I mean I was no distance from the waterloo bridge but I didn't know what was going on there and it certainly wasn't broadcast.

**Chris:**

The thing about this story is it was a story; it's an urban myth.

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 doing manual work, you're really really tired. I mean its 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 WB?

There came a point when I did start to doubt whether there was any truth about this story of women working on the bridge, maybe it was just a story, one of those urban myths. It was one of those things that tourists are told as they go up and down the Thames?

**Edith**

I had no home of my own, I was bombed out, I lost my home, I was bombed right out, I had nothing at all, lost it all, so she let me have a room in hers.

**Sophie and Reenie:**

They were awful those doodlebugs, I think they were worse than the bombs cos they used to fly over and directly they stopped, you know they were going to come down but you didn't know exactly which way to run, because they seemed to follow you didn't they, it was awful, really awful. And I don't think we realise how the war was until we see the tele today and see these people running and that's what we used to do.

**Chris:**

All the localities in the south of London were being bombed; i mean quite often people wouldn't turn up for work because their neighbourhood had been sort of destroyed. There were real difficulties in the Waterloo area in terms of keeping people housed and able to come to work.

Singing wish me luck as you wave me goodbye

Laughing

**Jane:**

What was it again, and the name of the gas they used was ethlidiclarcin, laughing, now I can remember that but I can't remember things you want me to remember.

**Sandi**

I'm afraid like so much of women's history it has entirely disappeared, and it'll be an oral history won't it

**Riverboat man:**

Well it's mainly passed down from people who've been older than me who've worked on boats longer than me. Most of the guides started in 1951 when people wanted to come on the river and they wanted to know all the sites of London.

(Boatmen at work)

I think it's a lovely bridge, its got nice generous curves on it maybe because ladies built it.

And when the built this bridge they always do a nice little touch

They put a nice clean touch to it.

Its been finished off on either side with a fine white

Self-cleaning Portland stone,

And so that when it rains in London

Which isn't very often

The bridge actually self cleans.

Well somebody must remember it.

Excuse me for interrupting I presume you've tried the Internet have you...

**Robert elms**

Certainly if you worked in construction not only on waterloo but on sites anywhere, as a woman a lady, please get in touch, and So any men who remember working with women as well, any one who remembers anything particularly referring to the building of waterloo Bridge

## Chapter 5 01:18:19:16

### David Church

I saw your advert for people who knew about Waterloo Bridge in the Saga Magazine.

They had security on the bridge you wasn't allowed to do what you wanted to do on it – there was security here – men with guns to keep you away sort of thing you know – to allow any of the workers – the working women to be on the bridge.

My father worked here for quite a few years on the bridge – the company – the main company that had the bridge was a company called Peter Lind.

My father's main function on this Waterloo Bridge was he worked a crane mainly it's steam driven with a weight on a hammer on – and the first function was – was to – make a putting cleating piles around the four um arches so as they could then put in these driving the piles and then fill them with cement to get the base for the four buttresses.

Do you remember seeing the ladies?

I can remember seeing ladies here yeah yeah – there was lots of them they were in your colour trousers – mainly – except the ladies which were in a blue um overall – the big you know all in one. But the ladies with the – um the bibs and the dungarees they were in more of khaki – the Land Army girls you know – they wore Khaki colour

I think there was quite a few hundred ladies up here and the ladies done the – less technical jobs, that's not discriminator – that's you know the ladies done the more lifting and the tugging where the men done the more crane work and the more the um the technical type of work you know. And the ladies were in two – I can remember they were in two grades of ladies. The ladies with the turbans and the um a – 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 do under take a more of a technical job like – oh the technical work they done you know – 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 – um 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...

### Doris:

We were stationed at large camps where the men were as well. And as I say we talked. We were allowed to say our piece – we weren't put down as the little woman at home, we were the same as the chaps

### Edith:

In the finish, I ended up to make bridges for our soldiers to pass over. This is very important it was spike – – spike they had and the bridge there – and I was making parts to go in that corner – making other parts to go in that corner and that corner the men would have to go and do that cos it was too heavy for me to carry That's how it went. But I started it

## **Chapter 6 01:21:17:22**

### **The day of Victory**

#### **Archive**

All over London millions rejoice.... in complete victory for a war that has gone on for 6 long years....

Doing the Lambeth walk.

#### **Ritzy discussion**

Man: I could understand the married women and older women giving up their jobs but what about the young women?

Woman 1: You had to leave, to give employment to the men coming home from the forces.

Man: It was ok during the war when they were needed but after that they had to go...

Women 1&2: yes, the men wanted their jobs you know.

Woman 2: once the war was over, they knew they'd have to go, they didn't make a fuss...

Women 1: 6 years of war, people wanted to get back to living a normal healthy life again.

#### **Doris:**

He expected that I was going to come back to the old form of just being the housewife and wife, as so 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.

Edith:

Well I wasn't quite the lady that I used to be. No no 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

#### **Doris:**

Every body 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.

Reenie

I hated that man, cos. I enjoyed the job it was lovely because it had – 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.

Archive under the pressure of war work women has entered a new field one in which it was thought not so very long ago she could not possibly succeed, she has succeeded brilliantly.

Chris:

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.

But those who accessed work on building sites their contracts were terminated; they were effectively ousted in favour of men. But 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

And 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.

Edith

Don't believe me – don't believe me no – no they don't um I was in hospital– and the man said - in the war – and I said yeah I can remember the war very much yeah – just very ordinary I was yeah I can remember but you how do you know – so I said well upon my age – so and what did you do? I said electric welding in the war – well you didn't do nothing – I said didn't I? And I told them. No no you never done any welding how does she know about electric welding, women's job, didn't believe it couldn't believe it, but it was perfectly true.

Sandi

Well I can't believe there's not somebody in London who at some point with their aunt their grand-mother or mum walked across Waterloo bridge, and she patted one of the railings and went "I helped to build this." I did that

Singing: don't fence me in.