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INTRODUCTION

ULSTER GIFT FUND PAPERS

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Ulster Gift Fund Papers (D912)

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Summary

The records of the Ulster Gift Fund comprise c.3000 documents, 1938-1947. The Fund was formed in September 1939 for the purpose of providing clothing and bandages to military hospitals and woollen comforts for the serving forces of the Crown. It existed for six-and-a-half years until March 1946 and performed immense and varied services covering very many aspects of the war effort of Northern Ireland. Its story is a tribute to the devotion of the large number of the women of Ulster who came from all parts of the province and all sections of society. They endeavoured to do what they could to brighten the lives of their men-folk in the services, on the seas, in the hospitals, or interned in prison camps in enemy territory.



Establishment of the Ulster Gift Fund

After finding a permanent headquarters at 2 Bedford Street, Belfast, the Fund expanded rapidly and very soon after the war began no less than some 200 depots had been set up. By 17 November 1939, 4996 articles had been received into the central depot and 3542 despatched to service units. Then, as the rate of expansion accelerated, there followed a sudden and swift increase: by 15 December, the total figures for comforts received and despatched were four times as large, and, in addition, over 50,000 hospital supplies had been made. By May 1940, no less than 68,435 comforts had been despatched to the services.

Workers everywhere were busily engaged collecting money and organising social events and bridge drives to raise more and more money. Their determined efforts elicited encouraging results, assisted often by outside organisations such as the Overseas League where socials were held twice weekly to raise funds. By the end of 1939 the honorary treasurer could report that over £15,700 had been collected by the depots.



Contribution to the War Effort

As the war progressed the Fund adapted and responded to various developments. To assist the growing civil defence services, a decision was taken in June 1940 to supply a stock of bandages and dressings to first-aid posts and early in 1941 members of the Fund began to offer appropriate help to the newly-formed Women's Voluntary Service. In May 1942, a prisoners-of-war service was instituted and for the next three-and-a-half years the Fund came to be the channel of communication with London on all subjects relevant to prisoners from Northern Ireland. The idea was threefold: first to compile a record of all Northern Ireland prisoners-of-war; secondly to arrange the sending of parcels to prisoners; and, thirdly, to keep in touch with relatives, particularly the next-of-kin, to help them as much as possible, and to cheer up their spirits as part of the general effort to sustain the morale of the nation.

The work of the Fund attained its peak during the years from 1943 to 1945. By the summer of 1943 its organisation, growing naturally, had reached a high degree of perfection. The machinery at headquarters was running smoothly; in the localities the members were working steadily and efficiently; the number of depots and affiliated work parties had increased, climbing by November 1943 to a total of 296 (225 depots and 71 affiliated working parties), a level at which it remained fairly constant until the end of the war when the total stood slightly higher at 298. It would be difficult to compute the total individual membership of the Fund. In voluntary organisations there must always be a floating element as people come and go, but the membership certainly ran into many thousands. It is an interesting fact that as early as April 1941 some ten thousand Ulster Gift Fund Badges had been distributed.



Supply of cigarettes

During the latter period of intensive service, the most interesting innovation was the supply of cigarettes to servicemen in military hospitals. In order to cope with this task the Fund set up a bonded store in their headquarters by permission of the customs and excise authorities. The cigarettes themselves, which were purchased by the war organisation of the Joint Committee of the British Red Cross and St John's organisation, were provided by Messrs Gallaher Ltd, and issued free to servicemen in hospital at the rate of 35 per week. By the end of the war, over 5.5 millions of cigarettes had been issued and this included the despatch of quantities to prisoners-of-war. One appreciative prisoner wrote to the secretary of the Fund: 'I feel sure that my wife, a loyal Belfast descendant, will forego this card to allow me to thank you for your thoughts and precious gifts of cigarettes, which reached me in Stalag 383 on 17 April 1944 in excellent condition.'



Post-war contribution

With the end of the war, the balance of the Fund's huge stocks of hospital supplies, some at headquarters, but the bulk in the depots, was gradually distributed. Civilian hospitals in Northern Ireland received 72,182 issues and the Netherlands Red Cross Society some 12,470. The balance of comforts was likewise issued to the men still on active service with 17,254 going to the Army and 6354 to the Royal Navy. The work of the Fund finally ended on 28 February 1946.



The Papers

Central to the records is the minute book of the Central Committee for War Hospital Supply Depots, continued as minutes of the Central Committee of the Ulster Gift Fund (with sub-committee minutes), 1939-1944. Also in the collection are over 2000 individual sheets giving the personal details of some 2300 prisoners-of-war with next of kin in Northern Ireland. The details are given of the name and address of next of kin, date of capture, location of prison camp, changes of camp with relevant dates, etc. The accurate and assiduous way in which these details were catalogued and indexed by the Fund renders them all the more valuable. In addition, there are financial books and papers concerning the Fund, October 1939-September 1947, including the sums of money raised by the various depots. There are also financial papers and other documentation concerning the Ulster Gift Fund Scholarship, which sponsored certain students at Queen's University whose fathers had been on active service during the war. Photographic records include one of a visit made by King George VI and Queen Elizabeth to the Gift Fund premises in June 1942.

Finally, it should be noted that the Secretary of the Fund, Miss Nancy Kingham, was also transport officer of the Unionist Party, Glengall Street Belfast and this has resulted in the existence in the archive of some election leaflets, circulars and statistics, etc, 1941-1970.

