

EVE AINSWORTH

To all the Dick Kerr Ladies throughout the years.
May your stories never stop being told.

With thanks to Gail Newsham, official archivist
of the Dick, Kerr Ladies football team.

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FOREWORD

When I was at primary school, I liked to play football. I was what my parents called a 'tomboy' – I liked to climb trees and make stuff and read adventure books – but at school, I wasn't allowed to play football because it was 'a boys' game'. In PE, us girls had to play netball instead, which somehow didn't seem half so much fun. Sometimes, though, the boys would let me play football with them, but I was usually in goal because nobody else wanted to be goalie. 'You're quite good, for a girl,' they told me.

Things may have changed a little now, but too slowly. These days, as an author, I still get emails and letters from girls asking if I'll ever write about football, because they love it. I don't think I'll ever write a book about football, but I've fallen in love with this one. It tells a story of courage in the face of adversity, of overcoming the odds and smashing the barriers that barred women from football . . . and it's full of heart and warmth and hope.

And it isn't fiction . . . Way back at the end of World War One, women and girls were pushing the boundaries and proving that they could be every bit as good as men on the footy field. Awesome, right? This really happened, and author Eve Ainsworth has woven the story of a football team made up of factory girls into a gripping, heart-warming story.

Reading *Kicking Off*, I was transported back in time to an age when a fifteen-year-old girl could be called up to work in a munitions factory, standing all day at a production line, handling dangerous explosives . . . a time when Britain was at war and every family had someone fighting at the front, or had lost somebody in battle. This is a story of friendship, family and football, and I think you're going to love it.

Cathy Cassidy





It was October 1917 when my life truly changed.

I suppose that's quite a flippant thing to say, really, when our country was already fighting a war that many of us privately worried we'd never be able to win. Families all around were struggling. The future, if you could ever bring yourself to think about that, looked bleak for most of us. But the truth is – without the war, who knows where I may have ended up? Without the war, who knows who I might've become. Of course, I should never be thankful that such a cruel and awful event happened, but I am thankful for what that time did for me and my life, as well as for many other girls like me.

I really think, that in many ways, it was the making of us.

For us, it was a new beginning.

When I was called up to help in the war effort – a gangly fifteen-year-old with frizzy hair and barely a sensible thought in my head – I wasn't as frantic as some girls

I knew. I didn't cry, or try to convince my doctor that I had some rare disease that would stop me working. I didn't know what to expect; I simply accepted my fate and tried to make the best of it. Worries (as Mam had drilled into me) were best ignored, they only caused more trouble.

I found out I was to become a factory worker, building the weapons that our brave soldiers would use on the front line. I had little say in the matter, even though I had no real idea what this work would involve. It wasn't like I could protest or ask to do something else. This was to be my assignment now. At least, like Dad said, I wasn't to be facing 'God knows what in some far-off land'.

I'd seen the posters they'd put up in the street. Special ones addressed to us girls. One had stopped me dead in my tracks. I took a moment to stop and read it twice, to really take in the message.

ON HER
THEIR LIVES DEPEND

It was just there, glued up on the fence opposite our street. You couldn't miss it. I had been walking back from the shop and I ended up frozen on the spot, staring up at it. Something inside me stirred and I had to hug my coat close

to my body to stop myself from shivering, even though I was still clutching the loaf of bread I had just bought for Mam. I had to read the words again, this time out loud.

'. . . lives depend . . .'

It made me shiver again.

'On her . . . lives depend.'

On her . . .

The country needed women.

It needed me.

I suppose that meant I counted for something too.

Of course, there were other posters all over town, all promoting the war effort. They had been up for ages now – ripped and weather-worn, but seen by thousands. They had been there to remind men of their duty, in case they ever dared to forget it. It was a similar poster to this one that my big brother Freddie had seen in town all those months ago, one that told him that his country needed him. After reading that, he had come home with a sudden determined energy.

'I have to go and fight, Hettie,' he said. 'I can't just sit around while men are dying. I have to play my part.'

It didn't matter, he said, that he was only sixteen. It didn't matter that Mam cried and cried and told him he was too young, or that Dad stopped talking to him for days,

locked in a darker mood than ever before. Freddie had decided that he was old enough to be part of something important. He needed to do his bit. His mind was made up.

I knew he was scared, though. This was my Freddie after all. Lovely, gentle Freddie. He wasn't a fighter. That wasn't him. Freddie dreamt of stopping work at the factory one day and learning to become a photographer. He wanted to go to far-away places.

'I'll be all right,' he told me, brushing my cheek with a cool kiss. 'I'll be home soon. I promise.'

And so, we watched him, and others like him, leaving for war. Leaving for a dark, brutal, unknown world that we'd only heard rumours about. Dad wasn't there, of course, he was busy at work, but I think even if he hadn't been, he wouldn't have wanted to go and see Freddie off. Dad didn't talk much about his views on it all, but I knew he didn't agree with war and he didn't like the idea of his only son going away to be part of one.

'It's killing for killing's sake,' he would mutter under his breath. 'Lives lost, and for who? Someone tell me who we are fighting for, because it's not for the likes of us.'

His views were not popular ones. Even Mam scolded him for being unpatriotic and cold. She said he should be there to see his boy leave.

The trams were leaving for the train station from the early morning until late at night and it was quite a sight to see. All of these young men, jostled together, ready to join their fellow soldiers already out there fighting. They didn't seem scared at all – in fact, most of them were laughing and joking and singing songs at the top of their voices. I would have been shaking like a leaf. My last sight of Freddie was of him standing at the back of the long line, looking so smart and tall in his khaki uniform. He saw me and Mam standing there, and he winked at us. That was his way of saying, 'I'll be all right. You don't need to worry.'

But of course, Mam did worry. Especially when the old lady next to us shook her head sadly and said, 'You know most of these poor lads won't make it back.'

I'd never seen Mam so angry. She flashed the woman one of her coldest stares and snapped back, '*My* boy will be back. He's a fighter. He's doing what's expected of him.'

Because that's what the men did of course – what was expected of them. They sorted out all the problems while us women sat at home, waiting and praying and keeping the house clean for their return. I'd often wondered if that was enough, really. The suffragettes round our way certainly didn't think so. They had been going on for ages now, demanding that women should be treated differently

– *equally*. Dad just got angry at the mere mention of them. He said they were 'daft women that needed their heads sorting out'.

Mam didn't say much about it, though. She looked at Dad with a tired, sad sort of expression and simply shook her head. I'd heard her talking to our neighbour, Edna Jones, about Edith Rigby. She was a Preston lass who was well known for her local suffragette activities – most famously for burning Lord Leverhulme's home in Rivington. Dad called Edith a 'dangerous and crazy woman' with ideas above her station, but when I listened to Mam talking, I heard her using the words 'brave' and 'strong-willed', which made my ears prick up. I thought Edith Rigby sounded rather wonderful, and not daft at all.

Now, with the war raging on, women would have to be brave. We were being called up too. Here was the evidence – with this poster, with my new job.

We could help. We could fill the space that the men had left. We could creep into the shadows and the gaps and quietly take over where they had left off. And maybe we could even be as good as men – just like Edith had been saying. We could make a difference.

So that poster, that simple sheet of tatty paper, nailed to the fence and torn slightly at the corner, helped me

make to make sense of one of the most important things I'd ever had to do.

What I didn't know right then, was that this would be something that would change my life for ever.

I lived on Spa Road, a small street off Marsh Lane – which itself branched off the long Strand Road where the huge Dick, Kerr & Company Factory stood. This would now be my place of work for as long as they needed me. I wasn't quite sure what would be involved, but I knew that I would be helping to fill the munitions shells that would be used for the war. If I was honest, it all sounded a bit dangerous and I was worried about handling explosive chemicals, but I didn't want to say anything for fear of looking cowardly. I knew from Freddie a little of what life was like at the factory. Freddie had been an apprentice there himself, working with the draughtsmen. He'd already seen some of the women start working there before he left himself.

'They call them canaries,' he'd said. 'That's because their skin can get a yellow glow from the TNT that they have to work with. They have to pack it into the shells, you see; it's mucky work. Not easy at all.'

'Their skin really turns yellow?' I'd asked.

'Well, yes – over time. Even their hair can turn a strange yellow colour.'

'That can't be good for them,' I'd said, shocked.

Freddie had shrugged. 'Who knows? But what they're doing is important – they can't be worrying about anything else when there's a war to win.'

'Isn't TNT an explosive?' I'd asked, then.

'Oh, yes. It's mighty dangerous. There was one time when a shell exploded in the factory. The poor lass that was working with it was only eighteen or so. She lost two fingers.'

At the time, I'd tried to hold back my disgust – I didn't want Freddie to think I was silly or weak – but now, *I* was going to be one of those women. Despite my nerves, I was convinced I was doing the right thing. If I became a canary – so be it. At least I wouldn't be alone.

Freddie told me all about the Dick, Kerr Factory not knowing that I would one day be part of it. He, like so many men that lived in the area, had sought work from this great industrial giant. Even our own Dad had worked there for a time, long ago, before moving on to his back-breaking job on the docks.

Dick, Kerr was part of us all, our community – it was part of our identity. Everyone always knew someone who worked there. We were used to the sight of the big,

bulky building and we were all used to the thick fumes that pumped into the air. It had always been a great beast of a factory, making trams and lighting, and it was even responsible for the electrification of the railway from Liverpool to Southport. Everyone from these parts was proud of Dick, Kerr and what it had achieved.

Freddie used to make me laugh, telling tales about the loud, bawdy men who worked there. He even told me about the football they would play at breaktime and lunchtime and how rubbish most of the men were at it.

'You'd think they'd never touched a ball before,' Freddie would complain. 'I mean, I'm not much better, but at least I can kick the ball properly.'

Most of all, Freddie talked about Alfred Frankland, who also worked at the factory as a draughtsman and was, in Freddie's eyes, a man of incredible warmth and intelligence. He was the man to whom Freddie had confessed his dream of becoming a photographer, and unlike Dad, Mr Frankland hadn't scoffed or bitten back with cruel words – instead, he suggested Freddie start saving towards his first camera.

Yet now, Freddie was in France – and that dream seemed so very far away.