

WVS/WRVS/RVS COURT CANTEENS 1961-2020

**ROYAL VOLUNTARY SERVICE
HERITAGE COLLECTION**

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WVS/WRVS COURT CANTEENS 1961-2020

Royal Voluntary Service volunteers have been supporting people in difficult times by providing food, drink and refreshment since our work started in 1938. During the Second World War this was for service men and women, Civil Defence personnel, the emergency services as well as the general public.

Always there with a cup of tea in the aftermath of bombing raids, the women of the WVS (as we were then called) provided comfort in the most dire of circumstances.

After the war, these women turned their attention and skills to solving the most pressing social welfare issues of the post-war period, and helping out the nation's newly developed public services. This included expanding our provision of tea and comfort in the fledgling NHS by providing canteens and tea bars in hospitals; an activity pioneered during the war and which we are still doing today.

Court canteens were a relatively late addition with humble origins, the first recorded instance of the WVS serving refreshments at courts was for the Derby Assizes and Quarter sessions in 1961. Members of the WVS Food Flying Squad, who were trained to feed thousands in the event of a nuclear holocaust, were asked to provide *'tea, coffee, and light refreshments'*¹ for the



Members of the Derby WVS Food Flying Squad, provide refreshment at the Derby Assizes 17th February 1961. WRVS/HQ/P/PRIS/CAN001. Unknown Copyright

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¹ WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R3/1961-CB/DBY/July-Sept

judges, clerks, police and members of the public who attended the three day sessions.

This new service did not catch on quickly, but over the next ten years similar 'pop up' canteens would appear in various courts in towns and cities across England.

It was in 1964 that the first permanent WVS court canteen appeared, not in Derby, but the Magistrates court in the new town of Peterlee, County Durham. The WVS Centre Organiser for Peterlee wrote in December 1964.

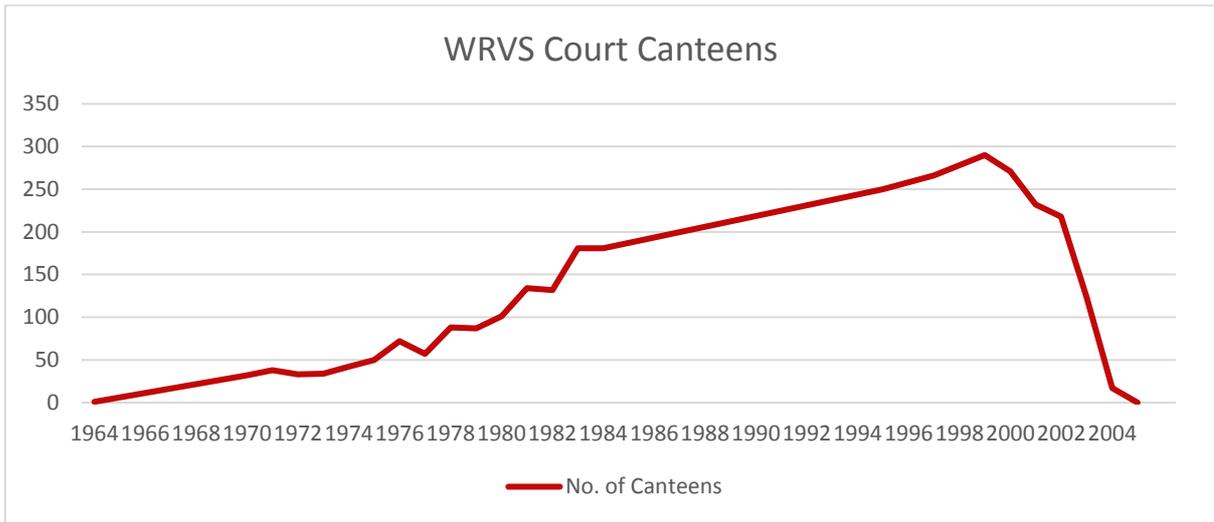
'This is a service which demands a great deal of organisation and is in fact a mammoth task all round. Catering is a problem because we never know how many people are likely to be there or how long they are likely to be staying. On some days, all is over just after lunch (we begin at 9:30am) and on other we keep the canteen open until 5:30pm or even later if required. During the past two months, we have been able to provide this service on numerous occasions for special courts at very short notice'².

By 1970 35 court canteens had been started as part of a more focused national effort, just one element in a period of change and growth in WRVS's wider work engaging with the welfare of offenders and their families.

Alongside court canteen we also started canteens in prison visiting areas to improve the experience for prisoners' husbands, wives and children; a development of our long standing work with the probation service visiting offenders' families in their homes.

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² WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R1/1964-DUR/PTL/Nov-Dec



As can be seen from the graph the number of court canteens operated by WRVS grew steadily over time, coming to a peak in 1999 with 302 canteens in courts across Great Britain.³

With the loss of our funding from the government in 1997 WRVS had to look at how we could focus our work and better meet the challenges of an increasingly competitive charity sector. Inevitably we couldn't continue to undertake on all our many and varied traditional activities.

In February 2002 the organisation unveiled a new mission 'to help people maintain independence and dignity in their homes and communities particularly in later life'⁴. This new direction meant that the WRVS's work with children and families would come to an end as they were 'no longer consistent with our charitable mission'⁵.

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³ Data for the graph taken from: Published WRVS Annual Reports and Reviews 1970-1997. Data for 1999-2005 was extracted from the WRVS services database. There is no data available for the years 1984-1994.

⁴ Action Magazine Issue 22, May 2002, p.10

⁵ Ibid. p.14



WRVS Members staffing the Wakefield Magistrates Court Canteen in the late 1990s. It was one of the last to close in 2005. WRVS/HQ/PBY/MKTTPRIS/CCAN001. Unknown Copyright

Between 2002 and 2005 all of the court canteens along with prison canteens, child contact centres and toy libraries were either closed, transferred to other bodies or set up as their own independent charities⁶.

The last two WRVS court canteens to be officially closed were at Alfreton (Derbyshire) and Lichfield (Staffordshire) Magistrates courts in August 2005⁷.

Almost fifteen years to the month later, in September 2020, Royal Voluntary Service (RVS) would open the first of a new breed of court canteens. The new modern canteens were opened in Norwich Combined Courts and Southend Combined Courts.



Royal Voluntary Service Canteen, Norwich Combined Courts. Opened 2nd September 2020. WRVS20200010. Copyright RVS

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⁶ See more detailed explanation of New Futures project in Action Magazine, Issue 23, September 2002, pp11-12.

⁷ Both are listed as closed on 18th, August 2005 on the WRVS Services Database.

Fifteen years is a long time in the modern charity sector and we have once again reassessed our priorities and our charitable mission in response to the most pressing needs of the day. We have re-focused our attention on helping all the most vulnerable in society, not just older people, through the power of volunteering.

Just as in the past, RVS court canteens and our volunteers can once again provide a safe and welcoming space for vulnerable people in an environment which can be distressing and intimidating.