

British War Relief Society

by Mike Samuels

I discovered the question posed by Ralph Maier concerning the British War Relief Society in the *May/June Bulletin*. As someone who lists War Relief and related matchcovers from the World War II era and who has a pretty large collection of them, I was sure the answer to his question was that the organization was an American one, not a British one. The British were to be the recipients of the Relief. Similar organizations (and matchcovers) were created for affected citizens of quite a few other countries—such as Russia, China, France, Greece, the Netherlands and more. To be sure, I googled the BWRS and found a good description on Wikipedia, which I excerpt below --

"The **British War Relief Society** (BWRS) was a US-based humanitarian umbrella organization dealing with the supply of non-military aid such as food, clothes, medical supplies and financial aid to people in Great Britain during the early years of the Second World War. The organization acted as the administrative hub and central receiving depot for items donated from other charities which were then parceled out to its affiliate organizations in the US and to Britain. These donations were raised in the name of the BWRS, rather than in the name of the smaller groups.

History of movement:

"Before the United States declared war on Japan in December 1941, the US had remained isolationist with regards to the events happening in Europe and elsewhere but had aided Britain via the Lend-Lease program. Also, from September 1939 through to the end of the war, various charitable organizations in the US collected money and items to alleviate the hardships and suffering of the British general public. "As the war progressed, and the British need for aid grew, a large number of charities appeared across the US to aid Britain - amongst them (but by no means all) American Ambulances in Great Britain, the American Committee for Air Raid Relief, American Hospital in Britain, British American Ambulance Corps, the British Hospital Association and Bundles for Britain.

"Incorporated in 1941, the British War Relief Society (BWRS) managed the activities of the various other charitable associations, in a similar way to the United Service Organizations (USO). The BWRS was headquartered on Fifth Avenue, in New York City. The BWRS continued to supply humanitarian goods throughout the war."

"While many of the smaller charities were covered by the activities of the BWRS, the major exception was the "Bundles for Britain" organization, founded by Natalie Wales Latham. Bundles for Britain was started in 1940 by Mrs. Latham as a knitting circle in a store front in New York City. Knitted goods—socks, gloves, hats, sweaters, and scarves—were made and shipped to Britain. Within Sixteen months, Latham expanded Bundles into an organization with 975 branches and almost a million contributors, and by the spring of 1941, it had delivered 40,000 sleeveless sweaters, 10,000 sweaters with sleeves, 30,000 scarves, 18,000 pairs of seaboot stockings, 50,000 pairs of socks, and 8,000 caps. By 1941, moreover, Bundles had also shipped ambulances, surgical instruments, medicines, cots, blankets, field-kitchen units, and operating tables, along with used clothing of all sorts. The total value of goods shipped reached \$1,500,000; another \$1,000,000 was raised in cash."

I would be pleased to email my listing to anyone who asks. In return I would only ask for the information about covers not on the list -- so I can add them toward the goal of making the listing complete. (Probably an impossibility!) *masamuels@samuelsinternational.com*