

CADBURY'S ANGELS?

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In 1879 Richard and George Cadbury relocated their cocoa factory from Bull Street in central Birmingham to Bournbrook, south of the city, later renaming the area Bournville. During the early twentieth century Cadbury's published literature and images which promoted the ethos of Bournville, its new model factory, and the high-quality products they produced.

Depictions of Cadbury's female employees became a central feature of the company's identity at this time. Although Cadbury's created a rich archive of imagery, it often presented an idealised view of the factory and its female employees.

Women accounted for over fifty percent of Cadbury's workforce during the early twentieth century. They were also a relatively young workforce, as many women left employment between the age of twenty and thirty to marry.



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An idealised image used by Cadbury's to depict women employees and promote the virtues of Bournville. *Bournville Workroom*, H.N. Bradbear, c. 1910.



Showing women working with machinery, this 1905 photograph reveals an alternative view of women's work at the Bournville factory.

George Cadbury believed the social and moral welfare of the factory worker was the responsibility of the employer and Cadbury's provided a range of leisure, education and welfare facilities for all its employees.

The company also provided a pension scheme, although very few 'single' women reached pensionable age. Instead a savings scheme was created for women as opposed to the pension scheme available to the male workforce. Due to their age and un-married status, female employees at the Bournville Works were frequently referred to as 'girls'. Gender segregation within the factory meant some departments were supervised by women. This enabled older single women to have the opportunity for promotion within the company.

The white uniform worn by most female employees became an iconic element of Cadbury's visual branding. Female employees were often referred to as 'Cadbury's Angels' due to these striking white uniforms. The use of this nickname points to the popularity

of Cadbury's marketing of its workplace, since overalls and caps were only allowed to be worn within the factory.

Female employees were encouraged to keep their uniforms in pristine condition and to uphold the high standards of hygiene required with food production, although not all women wore white uniforms. Those employed in positions within the cocoa department wore brown overalls and caps. The jobs in these departments were dirty due to the handling of cocoa powder. The nature of the work meant that it was difficult to keep the outfits clean enough to meet standards of cleanliness.

Another aspect of women's working lives at Cadbury's which was under-represented in the company's publicity, was the depiction of women working with machinery. H. N. Bradbear's watercolour of a Bournville workroom shows rows of women in a light-filled room sitting at benches, hand-decorating chocolates, an image typically used in advertising to promote the virtues of the Bournville Works. In contrast a 1905 photograph showed women working in a variety of departments in the factory, including the card-box department, which required the use of machinery. Such images, however, did not promote the Cadbury ideal so were not used in advertisements. ●

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Further Reading

The Suburban Birmingham website www.suburbanbirmingham.org.uk carries more information on Cadbury's women workers and the Bournville estate.