

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

WOMEN WAR WORKERS

Henrietta Lockhart and Jo-Ann Curtis

Oral histories are a rich source of material for the study of working-class history.
Women war workers in Birmingham tell their stories.

The Sound Archive at Birmingham Museums Trust contains many testimonies from working women who remember both world wars. For example:

We heard of the munitions factory being built at Water Orton, a grenade-filling factory, and I thought I might just as well go and try and do something for the country and I went and of course they said that 'yes, you could start straight away', which I did. We were working with TNT powder, a horrible yellow powder it was.

Edith Warwood (née Pittaway) recalls leaving dressmaking at home to work at a munitions factory at Water Orton during the First World War:

[W]e were provided with non-inflammable undercoat underneath, over which we wore a khaki overall and we also wore mob caps because we were warned that TNT powder would turn our skin yellow, and we hadn't been working many days in the factory before we could see this yellow developing in hands and faces and it didn't distress us, really, we thought it would be something perhaps to be proud of.



During the First World War Edith Warwood (second from left) took on dangerous work at the grenade-filling factory at Water Orton.

First World War: Expanding Opportunities?

War brought opportunities for women to enter spheres which had previously been dominated by men. Edith was later asked to take charge of 'the danger shed' where fuse caps were filled. It was the only brick-built shed in the factory, and had one wall made of plywood, so that if there was an explosion it would blow out in that direction. These women were working in very dangerous conditions, but the financial benefits were considerable: 'Now, the wages the girls earned in the filling factories, I think they might have come up to 30 shillings (£1.50)'.

Hilda Moss recalls women appearing in new situations such as working on the trams. She could remember them 'in their long skirts, going up the steps and ringing the bell, getting up at the end and moving the trolley'. Hilda's father ran a business making gardening tools:

We had women paid to do work that they'd not done before. They were not power presses, they were hand presses, and women can do those. Father said at first it wasn't suitable for women but they did it.

The First World War may have expanded opportunities for some, but working-class women have always worked, and for many the war made little difference. In 1922, Elizabeth Cross was denied the chance to further her education because she was a girl:

I remember my father saying had I been a boy I could have gone in for the grammar school exam and something like that and carried on but as I was a girl that didn't matter in those days. When I was thirteen I was working full time [at] that old fashioned public house in Deritend. The Crown Inn. Well up the cemetery was a little factory that used to make all sham jewellery, and I used to work there when I was thirteen and I used to have to go and be in for eight o'clock in the morning, and it was often seven to half past when I got home every night and Saturday mornings too for six shillings a week. I stayed there until I was fourteen and then I went and got a job in a factory in Grange Road, Small Heath, Butler's, and of course they paid me ten shillings and it was like a big jump for me.

Second World War: Experiences and Relationships

In 1942, Trudy Freckleton was employed at the Austin Motor Company drilling holes for rivets in the aeroplanes:

You could get a job easily then. They wanted the women in you see. Mostly when I first went you see there was only two of us started and I was the first woman to go on that section - they were all men. And then they introduced more women, and they came and I used to teach them the job, and of course they all got to know the job, but I was the first woman on the section.

Attitudes towards the female workers could be hostile:

They didn't say anything but we could feel the atmosphere you know, that they didn't really like us being there but they weren't nasty to us. It was just, I suppose it was just taking their job off them, you see.

Women may have been working alongside or instead of men, but equality did not extend to pay. Trudy recalls: 'The men got good decent money. But I think the highest money I ever took home was £4-1s-5d (£4.07). It wasn't really a good wage, that wasn't'.

Trudy worked because she needed extra money, but many women were conscripted into the factories and some came from far afield to Birmingham. Hilda Lewis, who worked on Spitfires at the Castle Bromwich factory, recalled a young



Many women were conscripted to work in factories during during the Second World War, including the Castle Bromwich factory that made the Spitfire.

woman from Durham who wanted to go home and wore a pretty little Victorian brooch which Hilda admired. One day she asked Hilda if she wanted to buy it:

'Oh' I said 'well surely you don't want to part with a thing like that', and she said 'I want to go home and I haven't got the money for the rail fare'. Anyway I told her to think about it, see if she could get the money elsewhere, but she came back and I bought it. Here it is here.

Despite the global events in which she and her fellow workers were caught up, Hilda says of this incident with the brooch: 'It was the one thing that I'd remembered about the wartime more than anything'. In such ways, oral history gives us a unique insight into the apparently insignificant details of individual lives. ●

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Further Reading

Extracts from oral histories can be heard at 'Birmingham: its people, its history' at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

Some of Birmingham Museums Trust's First World War oral testimonies are available at www.voicesofwarandpeace.org/bmag-sound-archive