

**NOBEL'S EXPLOSIVES COMPANY LTD
REGENT WORKS, LINLITHGOW**

1915

In January 1915 Nobel's was granted permission to build on land known as Captain's Park. The pressure for increased production necessitated enlargement of the factory and would provide considerable additional employment in the district.

In February 1915 the Linlithgow office of Nobel's Explosive Company came under attack, not from enemy aircraft, but from a local train! A spring on one of the carriages of a fast Caledonian train became loose and flew over the bridge at Edinburgh Road. The spring, a heavy piece of metal, crashed into the wall at the side of the office, breaking a piece of the stone work. This could have had serious consequences but luckily no one was near at the time.

In March 1915 the female workers at the Regent Factory, Linlithgow, went on strike following a demand for a wage increase of a halfpenny an hour. The management had already agreed to meet the women to discuss the situation but about 200 of the female work force took action and marched along the High Street. The management later proposed an increase of 2s per week and this was accepted. Although it was good for the girls to have a pay increase, there those who thought that going on strike was wrong. This brought a demand for an increase of wages on the part of the labourers engaged on the outdoor work. The men had sought a rise of 1d an hour but a bonus of 5s a week, to be paid on condition that a full week's work was done was offered and accepted without strike action. Soon strike action would no longer be an option.

Producing the amount of weapons and ammunition the armed forces needed presented difficulties for the UK munitions industry early in the war. This crisis, called the Shell Crisis, resulted in the British Government passing the Munitions of War Act 1915, allowing the government to oversee and regulate the industry. The newly created Ministry of Munitions regulated wages, hours and employment conditions in munitions factories, strikes were outlawed.

Munitions, shipyards, coal mining and farming, traditionally male preserves were regarded as vital to the war effort on the home front, and were classed as 'Reserved Occupations'. Those working in these industries would not normally be called up to go and fight and were issued with badges to identify that the wearer was in fact working for the war effort. Anyone who didn't appear to be fit, too young or too old was viewed with suspicion as to why they weren't in the armed forces. Some people were given white feathers to denote cowardice. Nobel's issued the badges annually.

As the war continued men from reserved occupations were called up. Male labour was in short supply so the Ministry encouraged the factories to employ more women. This would impact on munitions manufacturers such as Nobel's and workers within the industry.

Replacing male employees with females was referred to as 'substitution' the inference being that it was a temporary wartime expedient. However, it caused concern particularly with Trade Unions that women would continue taking on male roles after the war. It was seen as 'diluting' the status quo and the kudos of men in society. Agreement was reached and jobs were then graded as skilled or unskilled with clearly defined demarcation. Women in the industry continued to be paid much less than men were paid. Nobel's escaped the friction this had caused elsewhere in the munitions industry and work carried on as usual.

By August 1915 the factory extension, practically doubling the size of the Regent factory had almost been completed. The workforce of about 100 men and 200 women and girls employed in the factory would also almost double. This would affect the local female labour shortage. Girls already travelled from Philpstoun, Winchburgh, and even Broxburn and Nobel's were now looking to recruit in the Bo'ness area. The factory manufactured strum, a rope-like fuse with a black powder core and, for some time past, the employees had been working overtime up to nine o'clock at night. Despite the hard work, long hours and practical difficulties getting to and from work, Nobel's was very popular among women and girls. The supply of domestic servants from Linlithgow district had dwindled and well-to-do people were encouraged to make do with fewer domestics in the interests of national needs.

The prosperity enjoyed by Nobel's Explosives Co Ltd was reflected in the increase in Rateable Value. Regent Works, powder magazine and mixing houses, land and two residential properties had a rateable value of £1,250 each year from 1916 - 1919.