

THE GREAT WAR PROJECT – NOBEL'S REGENT WORKS, LINLITHGOW

THE 'MUNITIONETTES'

Nobel's Explosives Company had historically employed girls and women. When the Ardeer Factory opened in 1873, about one-third of the work force was female, employed mainly in packing cartridges. Traditionally, women workers were favoured in explosives works, perhaps because of their nimbler fingers for dealing with fiddly caps and fuses.

The UK 1911 Census showed women mainly worked on farms, in domestic service, shops and offices and overall few women were employed in heavy industry or munitions work. Women in all sectors were traditionally paid considerably less than men, the differential being based on several factors – the work was seasonal or considered 'drudgery' and demanded lower skills.

Before the Great War, men were considered the breadwinners and 'respectable' married women did not normally continue to go out to work after marriage. The school leaving age was 14 and girls often gave up further education to work and supplement the family budget.

In 1914 when the First World War started, Nobel's Regent Factory in Linlithgow and the sister site at Westquarter went fully into war production. The work force was increasing and men, women and girls came from all around the district to work. Public transport was inadequate, and many walked to the factory some from as far away as Broxburn and Winchburgh. The normal working week was 57 hours and overtime added to this, making the working day extremely long.

The disparity in wages continued and in March 1915 the female workers at the Regent Factory, went on strike following a demand for an increase of a halfpenny an hour in their wages. About 200 women marched along High Street and did not return to work next day. Nobel's agreed to an increase of 2s per week.

As the war continued, some men from reserved occupations like munitions were called up and employers were forced to employ more women because so many men were away fighting and male labour was in short supply. Replacing male employees with females was referred to as 'substitution', with the inference that it was a temporary wartime expedient. This 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 on average less than half of what men were paid.

The women working in munitions were referred to as 'Munitionettes'. By June 1917 roughly 80% of the weaponry and ammunition used by the British Army during the First World War was being made by women. The work was dangerous and unpleasant and the women worked with hazardous chemicals without adequate protection. Many worked with trinitrotoluene (TNT) and prolonged exposure to the sulphuric acid created serious health risks for the munitionettes. It caused severe harm to the immune system and could cause liver failure, anaemia, spleen enlargement and infertility. Exposure to the black explosive powder caused irritating symptoms, coughs and nausea and could cause loss of memory, digestive and circulation problems. Exposure over a period of time turned the skin yellow and the girls were affectionately referred as 'Canaries'.

Another ever present hazard for the munitionettes was the risk of explosion. Explosions at British munitions factories during WW1 included the Silvertown explosion which killed 73 and injured over 400. The worst explosion was at the National Shell Filling Factory, Chilwell, which killed over 130 workers in 1918.

Nobel's took every precaution to minimise the risks. The workforce was protected by enforcing best work practices through discipline, supervision and education. Risk awareness was high on the agenda, duties were segregated and entry to the site was rigorously controlled. Everyone entering would be searched and all metal articles left outside, including buttons, hairpins and jewellery. A uniform suit was provided. All locations throughout the process had to

be spotlessly clean with no dust or grit in any designated areas. Walls, ceilings and floors are scrubbed regularly and meticulously. Glass was obscured to avoid sun rays.

By the middle of 1916, 31,500 women were working in the munitions industry in Scotland and throughout the UK between 1914 and 1918, 700,000 women were employed in munition work. Nobel's Regent Works in Linlithgow grew through the war period, producing much needed munition products and providing employment for women and girls from the surrounding district. The work was hard and dangerous but the munitionettes played a leading role in the war effort.