

For our March meeting we were joined by Sandra Gold-Wood who told us about the work undertaken by women workers to produce munitions during WW1 and WW2.

In 1914 at the outbreak of WW1 there were very few munitions factories in Britain, the government brought in the Defence of the Realm Act and commandeered factories around the country and transformed them from making everyday items to make munitions, shell cases, bullets, detonators, pyrotechnics and poison gas canisters. With 500 thousand men signing up on the first day of the war, believing that the war would be over before Christmas, there was a shortage of skilled men to work in the factories and at the same time many women who had been working in factories were made redundant. As the war continued the lack of munitions and shells led to the "shell scandal" of 1915 and following lengthy negotiations with the unions who were initially against women working in the factories young women who were out of work were called on. The newly adopted Ministry of Munitions led by Lloyd George launched a campaign asking men to join up and women to work in the munitions factories. Two hundred factories were built quickly and 8,000 women were sent to the new factory at Gretna to make cordite. The women mixed the volatile and highly toxic explosives by hand and this led to their skin and hair turning yellow and them being given the nickname of the "Canary Girls", the chemicals could also make the women appear drunk and have other serious health issues. The factory at Gretna was visited by the author Arthur Conan Doyle who called the cordite the "Devil's porridge". Once produced the cordite was taken to other factories for the shells to be filled.

The factories were extremely dangerous places to work with women losing fingers, hands and suffering burns. Explosions were common with one of the largest being at the factory at Chilwell in Nottinghamshire in July 1918 when a catastrophic explosion tore through a shell filling factory, killing 134 workers and injuring a further 350, which was the biggest loss of life from a single accidental explosion in WW1.

Sandra explained that alongside the government factories locally in 1916 Ransomes and Rapier in Ipswich turned to making parts for the war effort. At the end of the war men returned from the front to their jobs in the factories and the women left their work producing the munitions. However, many of the women were seriously impacted by the work they had done, giving birth to children whose skin was also yellow or dying after the war of toxic liver disease.

In 1935 in preparation for WW2 the government again started building munitions factories and at the outbreak of the war in 1939 learning from the experience of WW1 the government quickly turned factories to producing munitions. Women were again needed to work in the factories, however, Sandra explained that some women were not so keen to work in munitions factories as they could join the armed services. By 1941 conscription for women was introduced and Ernest Bevan's Ministry of Labour declared that one million wives were needed for war work in the factories. Some lessons had been learnt and more protective equipment was provided with better medical facilities at the factories, although the number of accidents was still very high. Sandra explained her ongoing work as Chair of the Canary Girls Memorial Project which was raising money for a memorial honouring the women munitions workers to be placed in the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire. A motion to Parliament in 2013 although it had been well supported by MPs as well as the MOD and others had unfortunately come to nothing and there is still no proper memorial to honour the heroic work of the "Canary Girls". The Memorial Project continues to prepare plans for a memorial and seek funding and Sandra advised of the online petition available on the website at Canary-Girls.com

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