

## 'Rotherwas Munitions Factory And Fire-Fighting During The Second World War'

As the First World War raged on across the globe, munitions factories such as that in Rotherwas were established around the country in order to meet the ever-growing demand for bombs and ammunition. The Herefordshire countryside provided an ideal strategic position for a munitions factory, it was away from any major settlement and could be covertly hidden away amongst the abundance of rural farmland. The Rotherwas factory was constructed in 1916, during the second year of the First World War, and continued to produce munitions until 1967.

Between 1939 and 1945, as the Second World War rampaged throughout the globe, Rotherwas Munitions factory saw its most active years. As large numbers of men went overseas to serve their country, the need for able workers back home became more and more crucial to help towards operations abroad. It is estimated that around 6,000 workers were employed at the Rotherwas Munitions Factory during WW1 and 5,000 employed during WW2, the majority of whom were female. In 1940 it became a legal requirement for all able-bodied women to be registered to work on the war effort, and by 1943 80% of married women, and 90% of single women were employed in some form of war work.

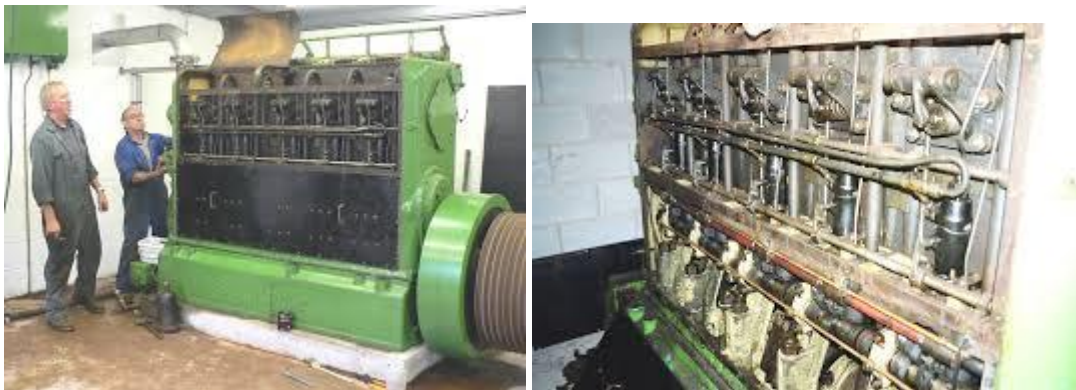


While the chance of death was in no way comparable to that on the front lines of Europe, employment in the munitions factory did not come without its own risks. Work in the factory consisted of, amongst other things, preparation of explosives, cleaning of shells and bombs and the loading of railway trucks. The exposure to such a range of dangerous chemicals and substances led to a number of long-term health conditions. Reports suggest workers suffered from the yellowing of hair and skin, rashes and most dangerously, stomach cramps. However, the most obvious risk to health in a munitions factory was the risk of explosion. Several explosions are known to have occurred at the Rotherwas Munitions factory, killing a total of 29 workers. While chemically inflicted health issues could be treated and monitored with regular cleaning and check-ups, very little could be done to protect workers when a bomb exploded.

One of the most infamous occurrences of a bomb accidentally exploding was during May 1944, when a 2,000lb bomb detonated after construction in an event known as the 'Hereford Incident'. During the incident factory workers James Wilder Little, St. Vincent de Lisle Carey, and James Frederick Tyler were all recorded to have risked their lives attempting to suppress the rapidly spreading flames and stretching their co-workers to safety. Had it not been down to quick thinking of several of the Rotherwas employees and six of the local firemen, the death toll would have easily exceeded the relatively low number of just two. Fireman Harold Edwin Davies and Assistant Fire Brigade Officer, Frederick Arthur Lewis, were awarded the George Medal at Buckingham Palace for their brave efforts during the Hereford Incident. Of course, precautions were taken to avoid such tragedies, but sadly they weren't always successful. On another occasion, local citizen and factory worker Lily 'Fan' Forrester was honoured with a Royal award for her determination to get her factory section back to operations the day after an explosion. She is quoted to have said: "I was worried about the boys out there".

However, it was not always an internal issue that led to casualties in Rotherwas. The factory remained untouched by enemy attacks for almost 30 years after its construction in 1915, until one fateful night on July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1942, when a German Dornier Do17 bomber dropped two 250kg bombs on the factory. 17 workers were killed and 24 injured by the first bomb which struck the transit shed. The second bomb deflected over the site and struck the home of the Superintendent of Police, Ernest Hursey, claiming the lives of five members of his family.

Once a bomb had detonated there was very little anybody could do immediately to prevent harm to human life. In order to reduce the effects of potential explosions, Rotherwas had an upgraded fire-fighting system installed in 1939. Alongside this new state of the art system, the site had it's own full-time fire-fighting service. A large reservoir of several acres was excavated in the area, which supplied water to an engine in case of a fire breaking out. The engine used was a 5-cylinder Blackstone diesel unit powering a Mather & Platt 2-stage centrifugal pump through an eleven-belt drive. This was a typical fire-fighting set-up during the era, and every munitions factory in the country was provided with one or something similar. When needed, the engine was capable of providing the pump output required to supply at least four fire-fighting jets of 1 inch diameter with 1,000 gallons per minute at 100psi. Despite its impressive capabilities at the time, it is unknown how often the engine was used during the Second World War as sadly no records remain from the period.



The engine itself, however, can still be seen today at The Waterworks Museum, Hereford. In 2003 members of the museum discovered the well-preserved engine in its WW2 bunker, and so began the project to remove and restore the machine. After three years of strategic planning, the engine was finally rehomed to the museum on 20<sup>th</sup> September 2006. The restoration process took almost a year and a team of dedicated volunteers, who had the engine restored and running again by July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2007. The official opening of the Rotherwas Engine House took place on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2007, just over 4 years after the recovery project had begun. The Rotherwas Engine remains one of Hereford's most fascinating and thought-provoking attractions, standing as homage to the brave Rotherwas workers who sacrificed their today for our tomorrow.

Dominic Wilson-Howe, Waterworks Museum, June 2024

For more information please visit: <http://www.waterworksmuseum.org.uk/>

