



# In The Munitions

Women At War In Herefordshire

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*Rotherwas munitions factory under construction during  
the First World War, seen from Dinedor Hill*

## Introduction

The Royal Ordnance Factory at Rotherwas, Hereford, employed nearly 4,000 women in the First World War. In the Second World War around 2,000 women worked there. *In The Munitions* is their testimonial.

Compiled from interviews with former workers, and presented as told, *In The Munitions* is a diary of the days when bombs, shells, landmines, torpedoes and weapons of modest, if not mass, destruction were made at the factory.

*In The Munitions* marks a moment in British history when women coped with adversity inside and outside the factory:



ROF Rotherwas. Former munitions worker Hilda Tipping's badge

childbirth and child care; absent fathers and amorous Americans; twelve hour shifts and dubious medical checks; sabotage and sickness; hardship and humour.

Women on the munitions slipped notes in with the armaments 'so the soldiers knew we were thinking of them'. They found themselves on the receiving end of bombs: 'A girder struck

my leg. I thought: I'll never get out of here. This is my lot'. And sometimes they feared the worst: 'My aunt said: "We're going to work tonight and I'm not coming home tomorrow". She never came home'.

'The plane was coming directly up the line of sheds towards me. The bomb bay was open and then I saw the bombs come out.'

'I was waiting on the Gate with my boy in my arms, worried. My husband was on nights and hadn't come home. "Haven't you heard? A bomb's been dropped on Rotherwas".'

*In The Munitions* provides a telling picture of times past. It also echoes the experiences of people caught up in contemporary conflicts - Chechnya, Kuwait, Palestine, Croatia, Bosnia, Iraq.

Annie Hall celebrated her hundredth birthday as *In The Munitions* went to press. Annie, almost certainly the last surviving worker from the First World War, went to work at Rotherwas when she was 16. 'They're looking for another war now', she remarked in March 2003. 'Terrible 'en it?'

Bill Laws, April 2003

## Foreword

This book is the culmination of so much hard work by so many people. It tells the story of the experiences of some of the men and women who worked at the Royal Ordnance Factory at Rotherwas during both World Wars. This in itself is reason enough to publish it, but we must remember it directly records the voices and experiences of those that



*First World War munitions workers pose for their picture on a nearby railway bridge*

were there at the time. As such we find that some of the tales published here are amusing, sad and, for some, tragic, but all of them form an important part of Hereford's local history, a part which will become harder to reach as time marches on.

I would like to thank those whose efforts have made this book possible. The interviewees, interviewers and transcribers in particular need a mention. Without them this project and book would not have been the success it is. Bill Laws needs singular thanks for editing all the material into such an interesting and accessible read and finally I would like to acknowledge the financial support the project has received via the Local Heritage Initiative which is a partnership between the Heritage Lottery Fund, Nationwide Building Society and the Countryside Agency.

This book embodies all that Herefordshire Lore aims to achieve. That of recording the living memories so important to our local history and presenting them in an accessible way—really living Local History. I do hope you enjoy it.

John S. Turner  
Chairman  
Herefordshire Lore  
May 2003

More than 50 women have helped to make this book. A number of men have also contributed, but this is essentially the story of the women who made munitions at the Royal Ordnance Factory at Rotherwas. They tell their own stories in their own words. This is their testimonial. At least 29 died a violent death at the filling factory. Others died from the effects of the explosives that they handled.

*In The Munitions* is dedicated to these women.

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