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## 'It turned us yellow all over.' Health Care Provision for Munition Workers During the First World War

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*Passchendaele* education pack. Many of the students were highly creative in their responses to the material, enabling us to better understand how historical research is received by those who read our work. Far from being merely a 'target audience, the young people offered us as much as we offered them, giving us genuinely new insights into the historical narratives we were engaging with. We also came to a greater appreciation of secondary school teaching by recognising that the schools engaged with the project in different ways. Whilst Richmond School's History Department encouraged its students to produce classic 'empathic' work, the English Department at Wakefield Girls' High School encouraged the production of much more literary forms of writing. The responses of Charlotte Inkster, Emma Gallagher and Harriet Ostrowski-Jones appear to be drawing on the modernist literature of nurse-writers such as Mary Borden and Ellen La Motte. The *Nurses of*

*Passchendaele* project provides an example of how 'public history' can offer a means to co-create new historical understandings.

#### **Acknowledgements:**

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## **WORK IN PROGRESS**

### **'It Turned Us Yellow All Over.' Health Care Provision for Munition Workers during the First World War**

#### **Claire Chatterton**

Just after 10pm on Tuesday 5 December 1916, around 170 women and girls had just started their shift in room 42 at the Number One Shell Filling Factory (commonly known as Barnbow) in Leeds. Four and a half inch shells were being filled, fused, finished off and packed. Shells were brought to the room fully loaded, and the workers inserted the fuse by hand. A machine then screwed the fuse down tightly followed by the shell cap (Johnson, 2017). At 10:27pm a violent explosion suddenly rocked the room. 35 women were killed outright, and many more were maimed and injured. Many of the dead were only identifiable by the identity

disks they wore around their necks (Gummer, 1919).

This highlights very clearly the potential danger that those who worked in British munitions factories in the First World War were exposed to. The explosion at Barnbow was only one of several that were to claim munitions workers' lives. The biggest in terms of loss of life was at another National Shell Filling Factory, number 6, in Nottinghamshire (known as Chilwell) when on July 1<sup>st</sup> 1918, 139 male and female munitions workers died and over 300 were injured (Woolacott, 1994).

Hearing about these explosions and seeing a picture of some of the 'Barnbow Lasses' with a nurse first prompted me to think about munition factory workers and their health care needs during the First World War. Thousands of women and men volunteered to work in factories producing armaments to supply the British war effort and the health hazards they encountered were considerable. Perhaps the most well-known resulted from filling shells with the explosive TNT (trinitrotoluene). This often turned workers' skin yellow, leading to the nickname of 'canaries'. Prolonged use led to symptoms including headaches, fatigue, abdominal pain, anorexia and nausea.

Some workers were exposed to other hazardous substances such as asbestos. Munitions work was strenuous, physical labour which often involved operating machinery and lifting large and heavy loads. Working hours were long with few breaks and the work was repetitive. Noisy working environments could lead to hearing problems and workplace accidents were common place (Storey and Housego, 2010).

In munition factories some provision was made for occupational health care and first aid but this is rarely discussed. My research aims to explore the nature and extent of this provision. I am utilising primary sources such as archival material from the Imperial War Museum, Wellcome Collection, Durham County Record Office and Leeds Central Library, as well as

articles from nursing and medical journals of the period.

Key areas to be discussed will include the health care provision made for munition workers and to what extent nursing staff and their colleagues were able to ameliorate the health problems they encountered. It will also consider the extent to which these health issues were recognised at the time and the government's response to them.

Although much has been written about the vital role played by both women and men in producing munitions and the impact that this had on their health, less is known about the provision of health and nursing care to this workforce. This work aims to increase understanding of the ways in which health care was provided for those working in the munition factories and the contribution that nurses made to this.

### **References**

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- Storey, N. and Housego, M. (2010) *Women in the First World War*. Oxford: Shire Publications Ltd.
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## **Exploring the RCN's Service Scrapbook Project: Research in Progress**

### **Julie Bliss and Molly Fennelly**

The centenary of the First World War has seen many commemorative events which have focused on the enormity of the war as well as the contribution of individuals. Many of these have explored the role of men, but

what of the women who worked closest to the front lines?

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) received funding earlier this year from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) to conserve