

Memoirs of the Gretna Girls



Hannah Atherton came to Gretna from County Durham in 1917. She worked in the gun cotton plant, where the cotton was processed and dried. Once it was dry, the cotton was removed from the large zinc pans and placed into bags; it was a very dusty job, and the workshop had to be hosed down continually. The women were provided with rubber boots and face masks to combat the mixture of water and dust.

After a while, Hannah became a 'chargehand' and was given the responsibility of supervising a group of girls. She had to teach them how to dry the cotton, and supervised their work. The women in the section were also trained in firefighting by the local Fire Brigade, and learnt how to use ladders and handle hoses. The drying area was at great risk of fire, and the women needed to be prepared for the potential dangers of their work.

Hannah worked at HM Factory Gretna throughout the rundown period in 1919, then returned home to work in domestic service.



Victoria Robertson lived in Carlisle. She started work at the Factory at 16, getting the train to and from the Mossband Section every day. Victoria worked in the electrical maintenance department with between 11 and 17 other girls, and was supervised by a Mr Forster. The girls worked in pairs, checking and repairing electrical ranges and light switches around the various buildings in the factory.

She remembered working around the factory and seeing the other girls in their khaki trousers and jerkins, or aspects of cordite production, including the strong fumes and finished cordite coming out of machines like spaghetti.

After the war, Victoria remained interested in electrical works and joined the Electrical Association for Women.

Elizabeth McCulloch worked in the nitrating plant, where the cotton was mixed with nitric acid and sulphuric acid. This work was very dangerous and no metal could be worn – the uniforms had no buttons, the boots were made of rubber, and women could not wear badges or hair pins. Elizabeth was the supervisor of a group of the girls and was responsible for searching them before each shift to make sure none brought metal in with them – including their corsets and hair!