PHOTOESSAY

Welfare in Lancashire cotton mills in the 1940s

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During the Second World War, with the loss of male labour to the armed forces, there was great demand for women to fill the vacancies in Britain’s manufacturing industries. However, absenteeism proved a particular problem, with absence rates for women being twice as high as those for men.\(^1\) This affected production to the extent that an inquiry was launched by the Medical Research Council in 1945, which identified not only working conditions but also the double burden of family responsibilities as major contributing factors.\(^2\)

The shortage of men was especially acute in the Lancashire cotton industry both during and following the war, with the additional movement of operatives to industries offering better pay and working conditions.\(^3\) The subsequent employment of large numbers of married women and mothers resulted in high female absentee rates in the mills, as women attempted to cope with the strain of their working duties while trying to care for and feed their children. Although Britain’s cotton industry had a long association with poor working conditions and employer apathy towards factory welfare, some businesses, with the encouragement of the government and local authority schemes, did establish their own childcare facilities and factory canteens during the 1940s as they began to realize the importance of such amenities in facilitating recruitment, reducing illness, exhaustion, and absenteeism, and increasing productivity.\(^4\)

The photographs featured here, which I used in my PhD thesis,\(^5\) form part of the Audrey Lambert Photographic Collection at Greater Manchester County Records Office and are reproduced with their permission. Many of the photographs were collected as part of the Manchester Oral History Collection held at Tameside Local Studies Library, Stalybridge. The collection is made up of taped interviews with local people conducted in the 1970s, many of whom also donated images of their working lives.

A nurse cares for the babies of employees in the nursery at Cromer Mill in Middleton during the 1940s. (Greater Manchester County Record Office, Audrey Lambert Photographic Collection, photo 871/5.)

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Children wear overalls as they eat in the nursery dining room at Cromer Mill in Middleton during the 1940s. (Greater Manchester County Record Office, Audrey Lambert Photographic Collection, photo 871/6.)
The canteen at the Elm Mill in Lees during the late 1930s/early 1940s. Many mill canteens in the Oldham district would also cater for the children of employees. (Greater Manchester County Record Office, Audrey Lambert Photographic Collection, photo 898/3.)

Children play on the outdoor equipment of the nursery at Cromer Mill in Middleton during the 1940s. (Greater Manchester County Record Office, Audrey Lambert Photographic Collection, photo 871/8.)
References