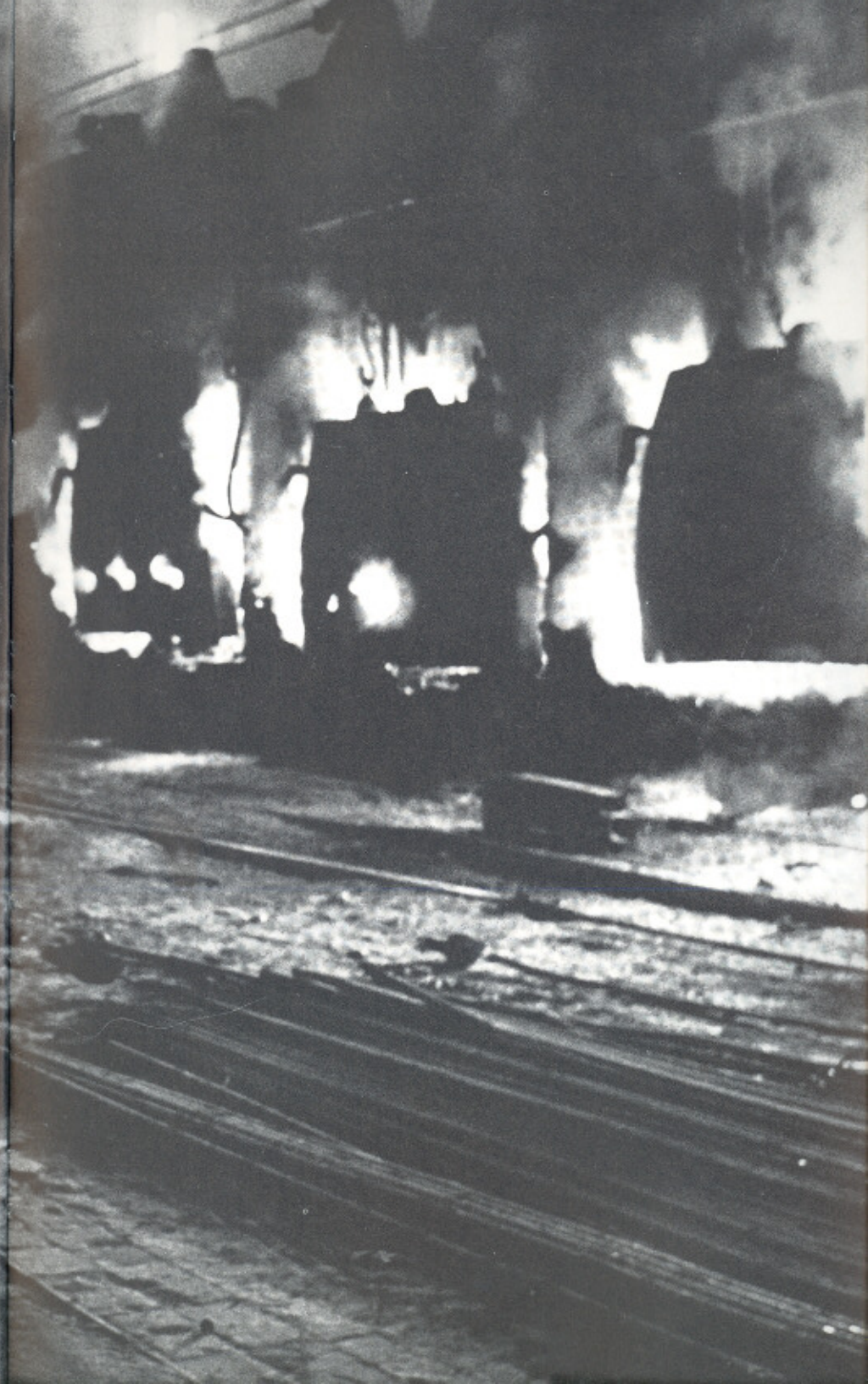


Born to Work



Nick Hedges & Huw Beynon



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Preface

The story of how a book comes to be published is often as long as the book itself. That is certainly the case with this one, for it is a story with many starting points – the most important being the West Midlands in 1976.

At that time Nick Hedges was a freelance documentary photographer based in London. Struck by the poverty of documentary evidence about people's working lives and environment, he became convinced that photographers needed to provide a visual record of the ways in which people spend a third of their lives. With the help of a fellowship from the West Midlands Arts Association, he spent two years photographing and talking to workers and managers in factories in Bilston, Birmingham, Tipton, Willenhall and Wolverhampton. It was often difficult to arrange access. For each firm that was prepared to cooperate, there were two that refused – for reasons of 'safety' or 'loss of production' and 'industrial espionage'.

Where access was allowed, Nick Hedges spent at least four weeks in each factory. The photographs were then put on exhibition in the works canteen of each factory and a set of contact prints left with the company. Exhibitions in the factories and elsewhere in the Midlands led to a larger show, "Factory Photographs", in London: this show combined material from all the work places.

This touring exhibition developed from contact with the Half Moon Photography Workshop (now known as Camerawork) and in particular with Ed Barber and Mike Goldwater. Together with Nick Hedges they obtained a subsidy from the Arts Council of Great Britain for the publication of this book. Pluto Press agreed to act as publishers and suggested Huw Beynon as writer. Huw Beynon had for some time been documenting work place experience through the words of the people involved (*Working at Ford*, Penguin, and *The Vickers Report*, Pluto). More recently he had been involved in the *Strong Words* publishing group in the North East, relating photographic to written accounts. The final form of this book grew out of a rewarding period of collective work involving the authors, Ed Barber, Mike Goldwater and later the designer Brian Homer.

In this book the text has not been written as 'expanded caption', nor are the photographic images meant to 'illustrate' some point made in the writing. What we have attempted to

produce is two sympathetic interpretations – one visual, one verbal – of life in factories.

We realise that these interpretations are only partial and preliminary, and that much more work of this kind needs to be done. We also realise that it is impossible to say this in 1982, without irony. For, as each day brings its announcements of factory closures and redundancies, this book increasingly becomes an *historical* document. The 'preliminary' takes on an air of finality; redundant work processes become part of the historical record. This record is, of course, important; so too is the need for it to be a living one. Certainly it should not be remembered separately from the devastation (economic, social, psychological) that has accompanied this industrial collapse. Over half of the people whose labour is recorded in this book are now out of work. This account of their lives will help focus attention on the need to create a society in which the ability of people like these is given far greater recognition and reward than it ever has been in the past.

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Access was refused by: ATV, West Midlands Gas, Goodyear Tyre Company, Lucas Aerospace, GKN, Metro Cammell, British Industrial Plastics, Guy Motors, Manders Paints, Ever-Ready, Qualcast, and Chillington Tools.



Introduction

Factories: places where people labour to earn a living; places where they spend a great part of their waking hours. Workers often ponder on this, adding up the number of hours they'll spend inside the factory in a working life: nine hours a day, five days a week, forty eight weeks in each of the fifty years that take you to retirement. That's barring strikes and layoffs, accidents and redundancy. For factories can be cruel places too. Places where limbs can be torn to shreds; places where people suffer humiliation and experience anger. They can be torrid, these places of work, these places where people live and die.

Yet for all of their centrality in people's lives, they are very private places. Separated from life outside – the 'real world' as it's called – they have their own language, their own rhythms and rituals: patterns of activity that normally reach an unknowing public only in part, and then as sensationalised in the pages of the *Sun* and the *News of the World*. They are places that are rarely understood by outsiders, for to understand them, to know the whole story, it's necessary to be there. It's necessary to "seek out the scene of the crime": the factory itself.

It's not easy to see into a factory. Few of them have windows. Workers often complain about this, but architects will tell you that in building design it's the client who calls the tune. Redditch Development Corporation is such a client. In the 1960s and 70s it was one of the major builders of advanced factories in the West Midlands. Its aim was to provide "highly adaptable premises in a wide range of sizes for use by almost all light industries". In providing such facilities the corporation's estates manager "did a lot of research and talked to industrialists about what they wanted". In 1981, he travelled to the USA, and again talked with business people, saying "It's important to find out what kind of factories these companies want, because that is what they expect when they come here." (*Financial Times*, 30 July 1981)

In all this there is no mention of the people who will work in the factory. In these discussions, the workers who will run the factory most often appear as a "factor of production", a resource (like other public utilities) represented statistically often as "pools of labour". For these people are *not* the clients. They are to the factory what cattle are

to the farm, a fact that comes over clearly in the psychological tone of advertisements like this one from Colt International:

"In factories all over Britain this summer men on shop floors will become agitated and bloody minded. Productivity will melt, industrial relations will slip in sweaty atmospheres of stifling heat, fumes and the stench and racket of machinery. Bad working conditions can frustrate even mild men into trouble-makers."

The workers in Newcastle at the Michel Bearing factory who complained of being "treated like battery hens" were complaining for more people than themselves: theirs is a common experience.

Too rarely, then, is there a 'public' view of life in factories: of the jobs that women and men do while they work there, the conditions and stresses they endure. Too often public discussion of factory life (of "productivity", of "bloody mindedness" and "strikes") is based upon ignorance. Our aim, in this book, is to correct this a little. To correct it through offering a collection of images – photographic and verbal – derived from inside the factory walls. They are pieces of evidence collected, sporadically, from the 'scene of the crime'. Collected to convey an impression of life on

the floor of the factory; life in a period of change.

All of the photographs and most of the narrative that follow come out of the West Midlands (Birmingham, Coventry and the Black Country) in the last half of the 1970s. The region lies at the heart of the British steel and engineering industries. It is the place which, in the nineteenth century, earned the description "workshop of the world". In this place a unique class of factory workers (generation upon generation over two centuries and more) which knew well the sound of metal and the clamour of machinery. In this century it is a place that has known prosperous times. The slump in the thirties affected workers in the Midlands less than most, yet it is here, ironically, that the slump of the eighties seems set to wreak most havoc. This is the context of our account. It is an account of workers used to factory work, experiencing industrial and social change and fearful of its outcome. It is an account that attempts to convey something of the ambiguity and ambivalence people feel toward the work they perform. It is an account that – to the extent we have been successful – says something about England: a society built around its place as the "first industrial nation", reinforced around its Empire, now in decline and on the edge of crisis.



Factory Hands

To work in a factory means coming to grips with the job; it means coping with monotony, with stress; it can involve heavy work in unpleasant and dangerous surroundings. Listen to this 64 year-old man as he describes the time he spends earning a living, working with his hands:

"I call that machine a spin drier; you get the oil laden swarf off the machines, you shovel it into the machine, you put the lid on which weighs 34 lbs, you screw it down, the machine revolves at 3,000 revs. per minute, that bungs the oil out, the dried swarf goes into the container ready for the metal refiners. When it's run for a couple of minutes you fetch the lid off again, that's another 34 lbs, and you fill it up again, and you put the lid on again and it's another 34 lbs, and you keep doing it, and by the end of the day you know that you've been handling 34 lbs. Why they don't make that lid of aluminium I do not know. If all the machines are going you are popping about like a blue-bottle."

This man has worked in this factory for 38 years. And, as he says, "I've been extremely

happy here, otherwise I wouldn't have stayed." But this happiness is in memory.

"At the beginning it was a pleasure to come here, it was like a family concern, they were interested in the work that was being done. You ain't got that now, you are just a cog in a great machine. You used to have the feeling that you was part of it. I started under a fellow called Mr Lawrence. Oh, he was a wonderful chap to me. In the early days this firm was proud of their product, everything that was turned out was good, but now it's speed more than accuracy. It used to be a family concern and that's why I stuck here for near on 40 years. Everybody was happy, nobody thought of leaving. 'Have a day off?' 'No, let's get back.' It was a joy to be here, now it's a penance. I'm 64 now, doing heavy labouring, but who would find me another job now?"

Who indeed? So he continues with the 34 lb lids; lifting and twisting, consoling himself with the fact that he's "made some wonderful friends here". This, and the belief that:

"If people don't work they're like animals; like

animals and plants in the field. They stagnate. Every morning of my life I'm up at about five. That's when my day starts. I can find a dozen jobs before I come out in the morning. I love cycling, I love walking . . . human beings are like horses, it's in the breeding. People say 'stupid nit, on the go all the time', but you can't help it if it's in your nature. I've got to be doing summat."

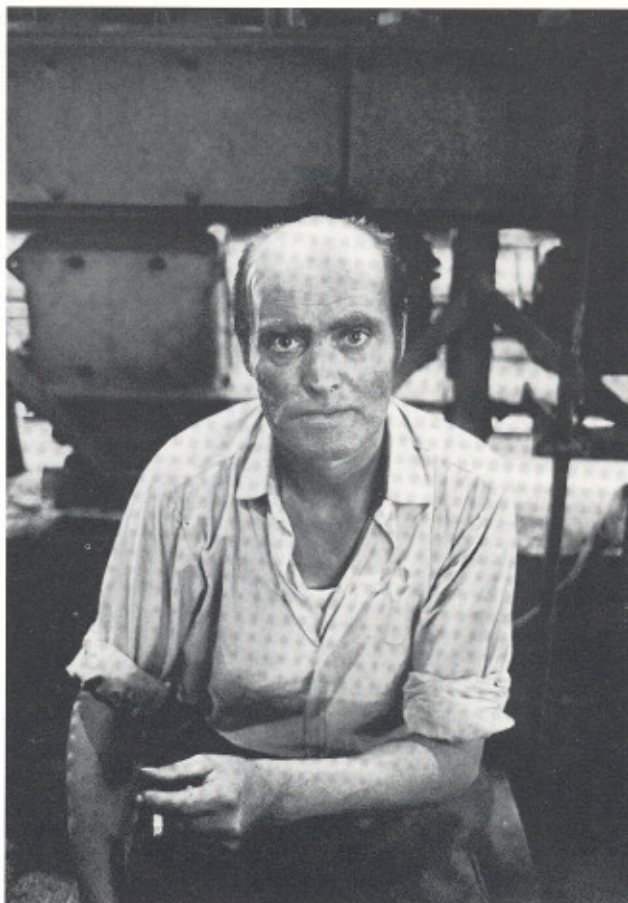
So there you have it. Sixty four years of age; full of inventive restless energy, screwing on lids because he *has* to do something, and because that is the something that's given him eight hours a day in the factory. As he lifts them he assures himself that he's not like other people ("bone idle people, who won't work, they're born that way") and looks on to the time, one year hence, when, in relative poverty, he will stretch those dozen jobs out over the whole day. For then he'll be "too old to work".

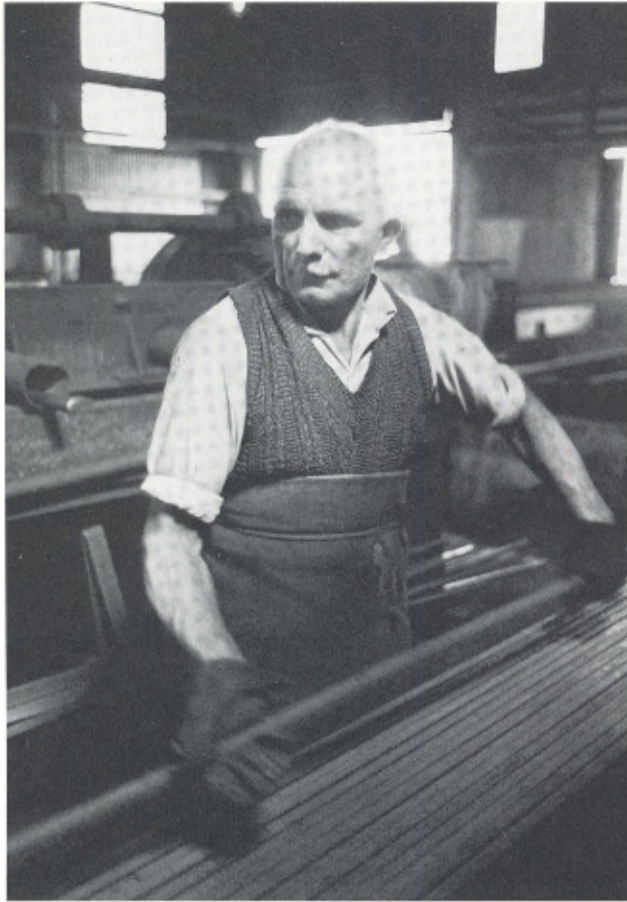
But it hasn't always been so; "retirement" is a relatively new idea. Things have changed. Some say for the better, others point out that it isn't as clear cut as it might seem. Things *have* changed. In the *steel industry*, for example, a shift manager on the blast furnaces argues that:

"Even now, after 29 years, I'm still a rookie. We are still babies compared to some of the people working here. I've had blokes working with me and they were 74 years of age - we had one 82 years of age. When I started you were lucky to get a regular job because you had to wait for them to die before you moved up. It's the same as in a fishing village. There, everyone is a fisherman, the sea is the community. It's the same in a mining community, the mine is the village, the main topic is the mine. It's the same round here, it was a family concern. We had as many as eight or nine Barwells working here; you go back 40 or 50 years, if you was a Fletcher you'd be alright when you'd growed up, you'd get a job here; it was a sort of generation move up. All my relations worked at the crane foundry, my brother is gaffer there now, there was about 14 Darbys worked there. I used to work there myself but being as how my brother was gaffer he used to expect more out of me than the others."

Work and family; work and discipline; hard work but a job for life. Above all it was a job in which you could work yourself up; whole families of you.

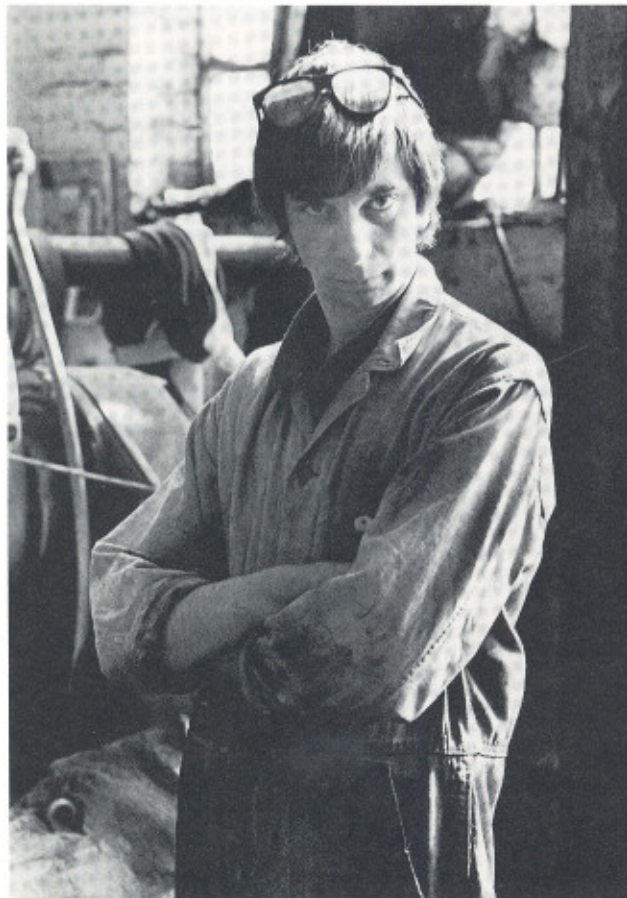
"I started here in 1939, but I was called up for the army in 1940. I got demobbed in July 1946





and I started back here in August. I worked on the 28-inch mill. It was hard in those days, they hadn't any tilters or things like that to turn them over. I worked on the mills for about eight years, then I had pneumonia. I was labouring for a bit after that, but it got a bit too much for me. I'm not very tall and you had to use all muscle power then. You needed to be a big 'un with those steel barrows. Then I got a regular job on the old soaking pits, and when they closed them down I come up here. I've never wanted to work anywhere else. My father worked here. He died when he was 64 and he worked here for over 50 years. My grandfather worked here too. I don't remember this myself, but he used to be a shearer on the open plate mill. You can grumble about the money and the conditions we work in, but I suppose you're reared in it more or less. You know it's hard work in the mills and you know what to expect. I've had my ups and downs but I've not wanted to work anywhere else. You've worked your way up to get a job and you know what to expect. Those that have left they've been glad to get back. My daughter worked here in the office. That was the fourth generation."

In steel, save in war time, women worked in the offices; the shop floor was the man's world as sons followed their father into the blastfurnace, or the mill, the openhearth or the melter. For such boys the introduction to the smell and sense of the works came early indeed.



"I started here when I was fourteen. Straight from school. I've been here for 44 years. At 14 coming to a steel plant it was a little bit frightening I suppose, but I had a little bit of experience before I left school because I used to come and bring my father's tea on Sunday afternoon and I used to ride up and down the plant on the stripper with him. I'd seen furnaces tapped because as a lad aged 10 or 11 I used to walk along the landing to go to the swimming baths. I think it may have been during those periods that I got to like the atmosphere of the place, these big men with blue glasses and towels. It could be that I was influenced without being aware of it.

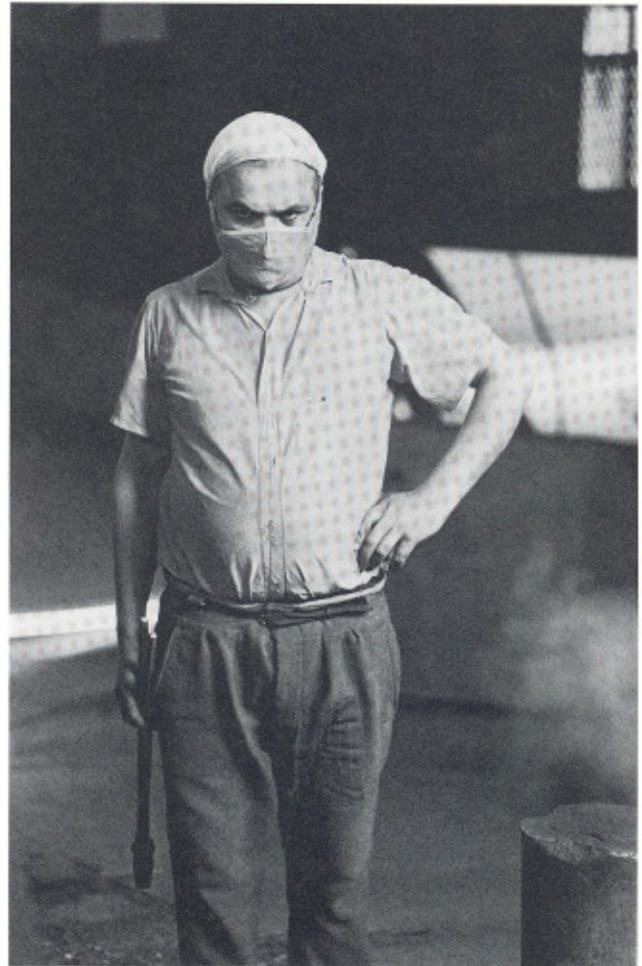
My first job was saw attendant – sawing off test pieces for the test house. From there I went to crane driving. My father was a crane driver all his life. He did 51 years. So, 'like father like son', I started in the same direction. But when I was 19 I changed my mind. I decided I didn't like crane driving so I packed it in and went labouring. I could do the job all right but there didn't seem to be any interest in it, it was a

repetition job, there didn't seem to be any prospects in it. I'd rather have a job with more activity, more interest, so I took quite a considerable drop in wages and went labouring. From labouring I did a lot of jobs – scrap loading, lime loading, gas producers, working in the pits, and eventually finished up on the mixer. Then at the back end of 1940 I went on to a furnace as a 'third hand'. I became 'first hand' round about 1954, and I've been 'first hand' ever since. I went to India from 1961 to 1964 as an instructor on open hearth practice. If I'd have stayed on the cranes and I'd survived, I'd be senior crane man now but as it is I'm senior furnaceman so I'd got to the top which ever way I'd gone. I look forward to it, every day I'm always early, always interested. Being in iron and steel is the best job a man can have, its not repetitive, there is always a challenge, there is always something different. I don't know how these people who do these jobs in car factories, and other jobs can stick it. The sheer boredom would drive you mad. I've worked shifts for 42 years, even when I went to India, it's got its advantages. You get a fair amount of free time, you get time off in the week which is sometimes better than having it off at the weekend. It's a bit rough on the wife and family, but once you get used to it I think that shift work is better than days. People who've got hobbies like gardening and pigeon flying, get free time that they wouldn't get if they was on days.

My one regret is that I didn't get a better education on the steelmaking. I've got plenty of experience of practical steelmaking, but when it comes to the technical side, I know enough to carry me through but that's all. But, you have got to have the practical man. You can't do without him. In fact you have got a distinct advantage over even the cleverest of those technical people. They only know what they've read or what's been written down, whereas you're involved in the practical matter, and you can see things and work it out for yourself. But I still regret that I didn't get a better education in the steelmaking side. Too late to get it now I suppose."

Too late for a lot of things. In 1978 another of the leading hands noted that:

"The morale is very low at the moment, in the past five years we've been used to working six furnaces and suddenly splitting down to three furnaces, it created quite a few redundancies (all have been voluntary mind) but we're missing the majority of our old pals who we started to work with and came out of the services with. I don't think people feel too



secure with it at the moment. *Personally* it doesn't worry me – I'm senior leading hand on the shift – but it worries me for all the rest of the young fellows on the shift, who are buying houses and rearing families. They can see prosperity suddenly go down before them."

Prosperity is one thing, satisfaction and a sense of purpose in life and in work, another. In toolmaking, an official of the NULMW (the National Union of Lock and Metal Workers) describes how:

"The job satisfaction has been completely eroded. When I started, when I was 21, we had a drawing, we sawed our own steel, we progressed our own machining, we marked it off and we did all the relevant parts; we could basically say that we had made a tool. Now because of the techniques of the day, you do one part of it; it takes four or five people to make a tool. The techniques of the job have destroyed the job satisfaction. It can't go back, engineers are getting new techniques every day. These spark erosion machines are tape [computer] controlled, the computer takes the tape off the drawing, the tape is fed into the



machine and all the chap has got to do is to see that it is running safe and the functions are functioning. In whatever field we're in – industry, business – whatever strata of society we belong to, money is the governing power at the present time. The work person has woken up to this after being dormant for a hundred years – to who is producing the cash, to who is the animal that does the work, that produces the profits, that produces the factories and the new machines. They have woken up and got a fairer return for their labour. But I'm a very disillusioned man. I don't think that even with all the increase in wages and the new techniques at work that people are as happy as they were a generation back. I see the unrest in the youngsters; they're completely lost."

Lost in the middle of work that only one word can describe:

"Boring! It is very monotonous this job."

And so it is. But it's not exceptional and as they put it, "if you don't come here, you've got to go somewhere else." Places, much the same,

differing in their financial returns. Places that bore you to death; wear you out and make you old. Places where men and women, boys and girls, work.

"It's boring. Most of the time you are doing the same thing. Off and on. You go for the money. Most women do. I couldn't wait to get out of school, but, give me the chance to get back to school tomorrow and I would. I'd go back day and night. I'm coming on 18 and I feel like an old woman. I'd like to work with kids."

In the absence of something different people spend time within their imagination. This young woman wouldn't marry until she was older, "say 25 – then you can save up for a beautiful house". Others – men for the most part – dream of success. Like this one who worked in the tanker bay of a dairy.

"I'm a Grade One Operator, I can do anything in that tanker bay. I'm over 21, and, say, if the supervisor was absent, I could take over and do it all myself, so I get the top rate. I give myself four years, I wouldn't stop in overalls. I'd like to get the supervisor's job and work up from there, and I've 12 months to go. I'm not satisfied to stop as a worker all my life, I want to get somewhere, some blokes don't. If you're a worker you can only call yourself a labourer, can't you? Wear overalls. But if you become a supervisor or foreman, or even a manager, you've proved yourself in life; that's my way of looking at it."

That such ways of talking are limited to men is no coincidence. For, as one woman put it:

"Women have gone into factories, gone into offices, gone into shops, and taken lower paid jobs, and we have been brain-washed about our capabilities. I wish I was 30, oh I do. I'd be fighting like a dog. I wish I was younger to really get in. Because it has only just started for women, we have only come a very very small step, there is far to go. I want to see women on the board. I want to see women superintendents. But we are on the lower strata of all the gradings. Time will alter that, but it is so slow. I wish that I'd been able to get my ladies more interested in trade unions."

So there it is. These are the words of a few of the people who work in factories in the Midlands. These are the people whose working lives give substance to the pages that follow.



Work Places

Factories: sometimes 'the plant' or 'the works'; words change but these are the places where people work. These are the places where people, hundreds or thousands of them at a time, turn up day and night to work for wages – 'to make a living'. Places like the Bilston steel works, employed over two thousand people – enough in an earlier time to have made up a thriving market town with all manner of activities and pastimes. In contrast the factory is for one thing only. It's your 'place of work'. Henry Ford put it clearly:

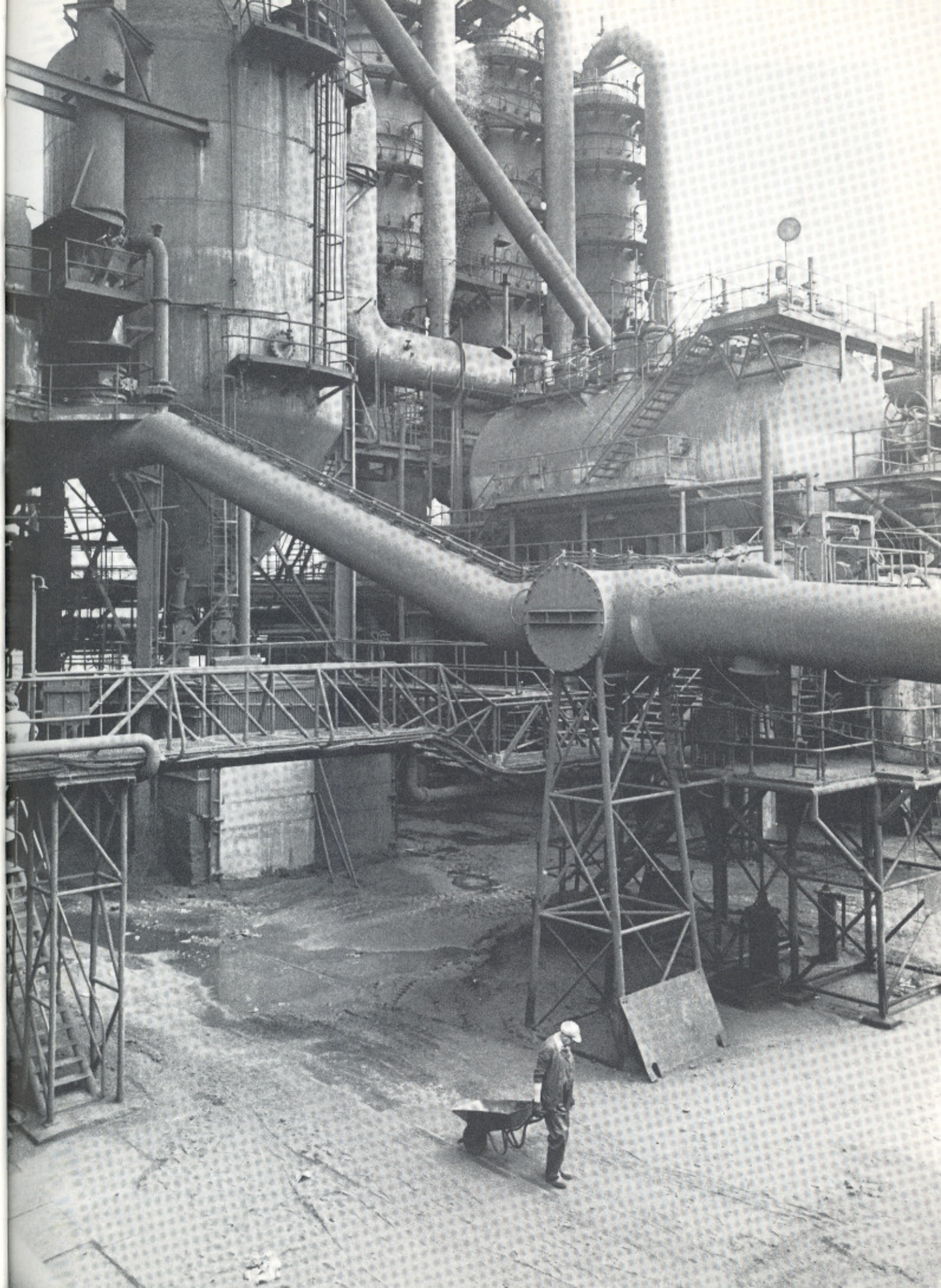
"When we are at work we ought to be at work. When we are at play we ought to be at play. There is no use trying to mix the two. The sole object ought to be to get the work done and to get paid for it. When the work is done, then the play can come, but not before."

These places then are not fun palaces. Managers today will tell you that. So will the politicians. Work is about production and production is about numbers; about 'productivity'. Built in that image these centres of sweat have a functional, austere look about them. People – men and women old and young black

and white – talk of experiencing an intense (if momentary) sense of depression, of foreboding even, as they fall daily within the shadow of the workplace. Yet within that shadow they spend much of their working lives. Engulfed in the body of the machine. Engulfed because:

"You're brought up to go to work. Work is something that your father has done. It's a *class* thing: you're used to it; you're born to it. You must work; there's the social stigma – unemployed! You are born to work."

And for most people it seemed that you were born to work *hard*. That's what's lost in the welter of numbers; in the *abstract* talk of 'investment' and 'return'. In Britain – and particularly in the so-called 'traditional sectors' of industry – output has for so long (centuries in fact) been squeezed out of the sheer physical passion of the class that was born to it. It was through this effort that *people* were made. It's often said that you can tell a steel worker by his hands: by the size of them, the flatness of the fingers, their apparent ability to withstand a level of pain and heat that





other people (people accustomed to using pens, typewriters, and cameras, say) would find unbearable. It's often said, but the truth is often lost: hands like these are not born on the ends of babies arms; they're made through endless years of enduring sparks and bumps. They're made in the work place.

"I've worked here for around 29 years. I started in 1948. The first job I had was pig lifting. We had three old furnaces, 20- or 26-ton ladles, and when we had filled them any iron that was left we used to run it down into a pig bed where we made pig iron. It used to be broken up when it was still hot, and then when that was cooled

down we used to pick it up and load it into railway trucks which went out to different foundries. It was hard work then; in them days a good'un came and he stopped, a bad'un he came he looked, and he went. From there I moved on to bye-turning, then I worked me way up to Number Two furnace until they built this furnace in 1954. I had a job on her when she first went in. At that time we all thought we had got 'collar and tie jobs' up here, but we found out it was quite different. It wasn't a press button job, it was all bar shovel and sledge.

Working – as men alone – day and night but



always under the orange yellow glow of the molten metal, it's not difficult to see how people can talk of it "getting in the blood" and of it being "a man's job".

"The first job I had was a trainee accountant, but after 12 months I left; it was too docile, too quiet. I never think about the danger of the job, in a way the danger makes you enjoy it more. If you can overcome a danger you enjoy overcoming it. The danger is a challenge, for most men it is the same thing."

But even here, in an industry most susceptible to romantic and heroic images, men who work



there find it difficult to escape a sense of irony. In hell, the work *is* hard and it *is* hot. Sometimes it's really hot. One man who worked at a shearer on the rolling mill remembers how, when he first came to the works, "it was hard. And it's still hard now".

"I worked on the seven-inch mill, which was on a flat bed. We used to have hooks on your hands and pick them up on to rollers where you drag them under the blades, cut them and throw them off yourself. I've always been shearing. After 18 months they changed the bed. They modernised it and made it a shade easier. But you had to cut them hotter to keep the bed down. On the big stuff the big hexagons or squares, the temperature has got to be in the nineties. Nineties or hundreds easy."

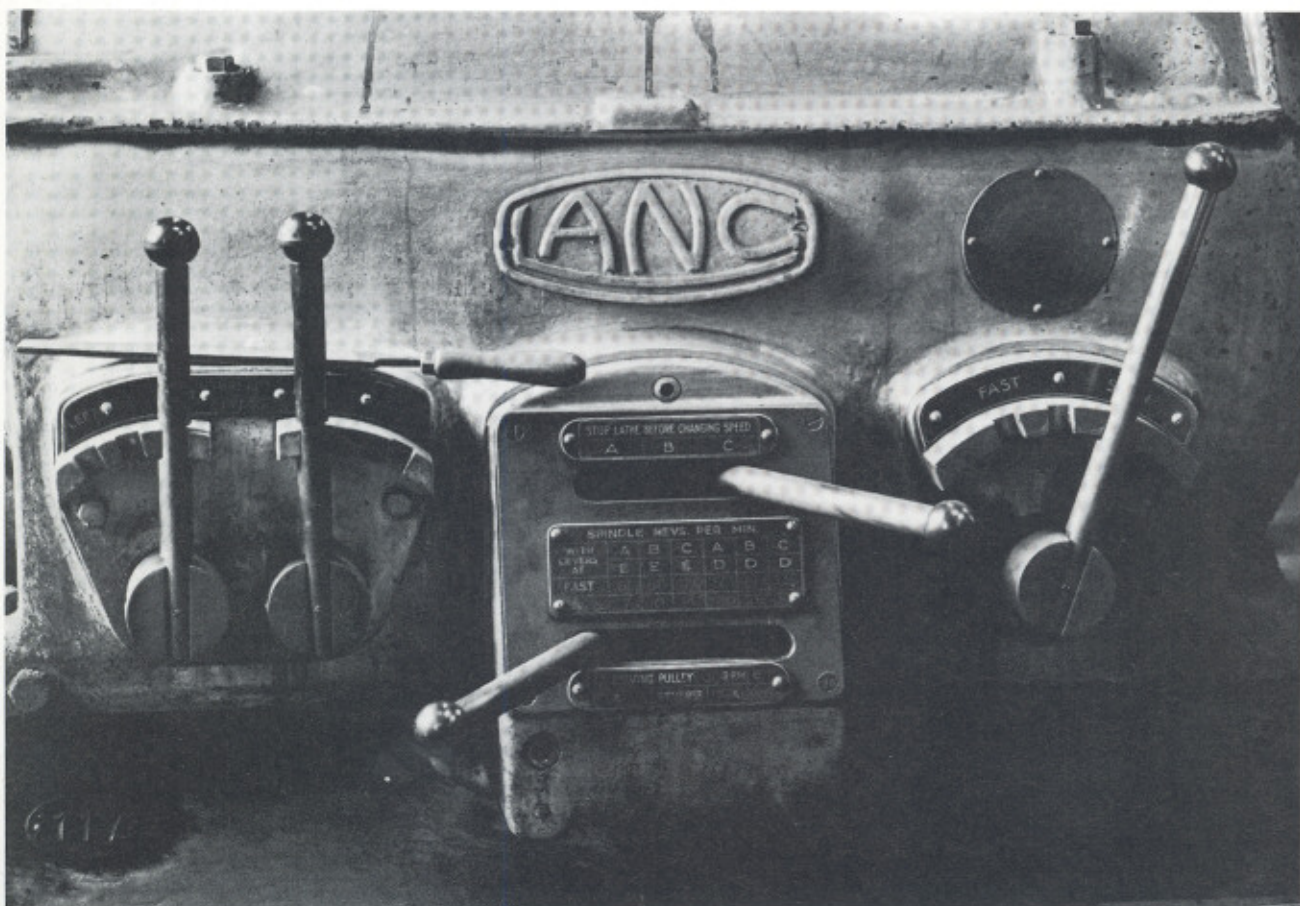
It's less hot in the winter (sometimes you're thankful for the warmth) but in the summer it could be as high as 150 degrees. "That's when we get the weight down."

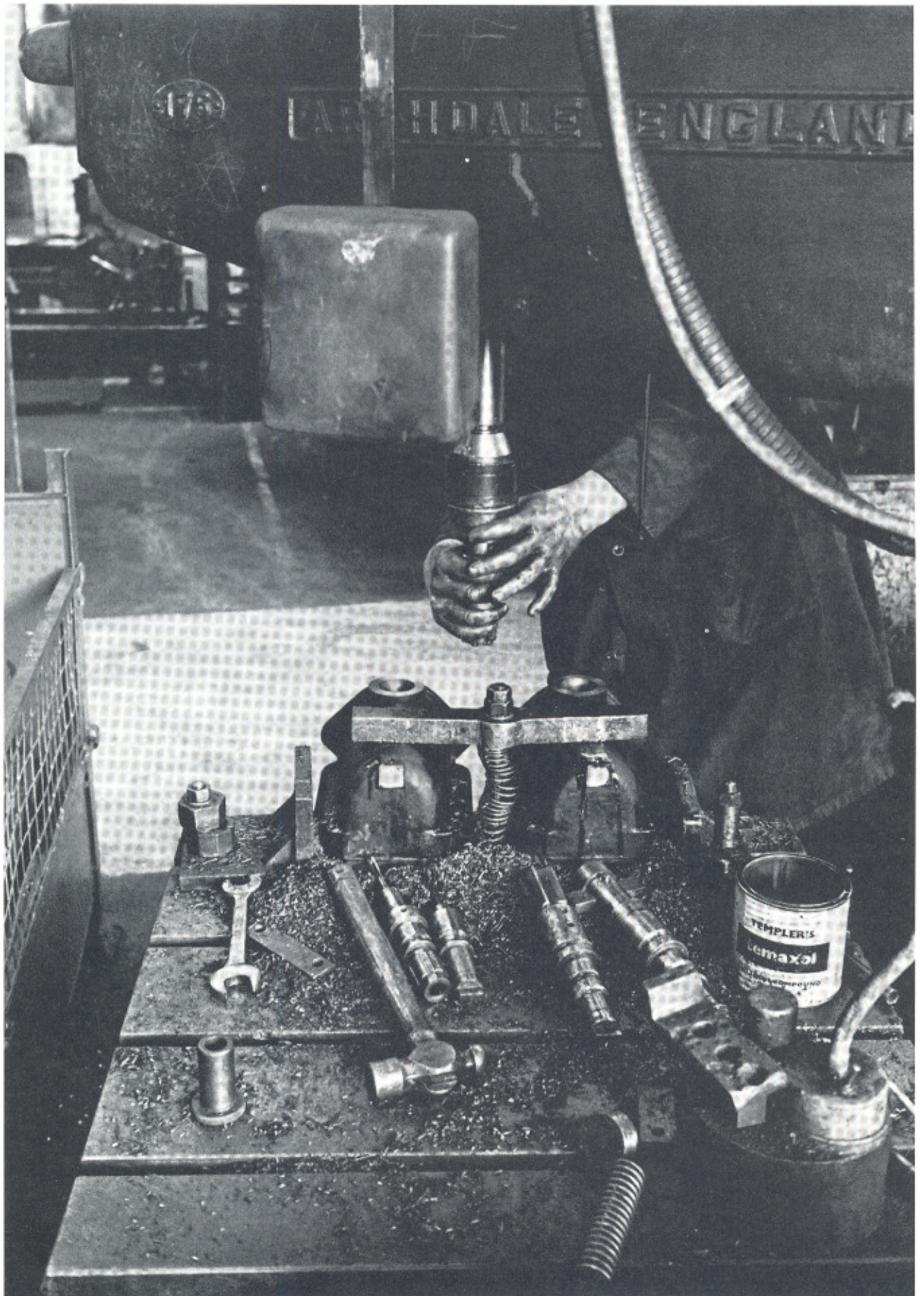
It's hard, it's hot and it's *dirty*. Some men cope with the heat better than others (some men live on salt tablets in the hot months), but everyone has to breathe. Even on the furnaces.

"The conditions of work are very poor. It's dusty it affects your lungs. Heat doesn't bother me much, it's what you breathe in. It is grossly underpaid this job, the money is hopeless. To get a good week's money you have to get 80 or 90 hours in a week. If I worked here for 40 hours in the week, I should only pick up about £35. You've got to work the hours to get the money. There isn't much chance of improving it now with all this control on the wages. There is an old saying, 'hard work never kills anybody,' but it goes a long way towards it I can tell you that."

And it goes on doing it endlessly.







"I've been doing shift work for 24 years and I still don't like it; especially nights. I always thought that working nights was for cat burglars and midwives. But, at my age you've just got to face the job, I can't just leave this job now and get another one."

And here too (trapped) amidst the flames and the danger, men know that you're never as safe as you think you are. The machinery and the metal are one thing; men – company men, managers, men with power – are another. There's always the threat of the jibe, the insult or the humiliation. You know all this because it's 'a class thing'. You've seen it happen so many times. To so many people. Like this man.

"In 1955 I worked with this fellow called Captain Beddows. At that particular time he was making tea for the bosses, and also cleaning the pulpits. He retired, so the mill manager sent for me and said, 'Joe, how would you like to look after me like Beddows did?' We used to work overtime on a Saturday from one till six, and then on Sundays from six in the morning till two, to make our wages up. So I took this job on making tea for the boss. Then in 1967 the new boss sent for me. I was ever so black I shall never forget it. I used to like tatting about, getting a bit black, because if you get a bit black and someone sees you, it looks as though you've been doing something. Well he offered me the job of training officer in the mill to train the bank operators. So I said, 'How would you like me to come dressed?' and he said, 'Come a bit respectable.' So I came in a collar and tie and dark trousers.

Then in 1972 the bombshell came: '40 or 50 white collar people had got to be made redundant in the works.' I was sent for and the personnel officer gave me this letter. It was such a shock. I went back to the mill and while I was reading the letter they came and told me that a job had been found for me as chargehand for the wreckers. And I asked the question, 'If I refuse this, what will be the answer?' They said I should go out of the gate. As you know when you're a married man you've got to put the bread and butter on the table; I took it."

The 'class thing'. It's about work and what you do there: the dangers you face, the pain you endure, also the money you're paid and how you're paid it. It's about all this and a lot more besides. In England, where, from early days, an aristocracy learned how to profit from commerce and enterprise, it has also carried profound overtones of status and worth. Here,



the fabric of class expressed itself historically through the school system, through the church (as against the chapel) and through the officer system in the armed forces. Overtones of this are preserved in the staff/works divisions that segregate canteens and carparks in the modern factory. At the British America Tobacco plant on the dockside in Liverpool for example, the canteens were termed "messes". Here a system of gradation worked downward from the top of the building; on each floor was a numbered mess and at each level, access was severely restricted.

In a society such as this, to be a worker (to be a part of that class) involves something more than a cipher, a grading in a sociological survey or government handbook – it strikes quite deeply into you, into who you are. Brought up in such a society, you learn to handle it, and to protect yourself. You learn to distance yourself from 'them'; you think twice before taking up offers to join them. But your life is built within their orbit . . . 'it's a class thing'.



If you work in a factory you think a lot about time. You do if you run one too. For while machine production (the size and weight and movement of the machines) represents the most immediate and pressing image of factory life, those machines and the people who tend them are regulated by the control of time. If you work in a factory you endure that regulation.

You begin work – in the morning, afternoon or evening – with the clock. It's been like that for a century now. And before the clocking machine 'the masters' had an acute sense of time. In fact as far back as 1700, the Law Book of the Crowley Iron Works instructed the monitors to "create an account of time" by way of time sheets and watches that were "so locked up that it may not be in the power of any person to alter the same". Over the years many people have tried and failed; many too have cursed as the "big hand" makes that fatal jerk past the point of penalty and discipline. For every works has a timekeeper: someone to record what the clocks have recorded.

"I'm the timekeeper here at Tame Works, I've been here 18 years since leaving the army. I'm responsible for the clocks and see that the employees that are on the clock, clock their cards to record the time that they come in and

also when they leave the factory. I'm also responsible for sounding the hooter at the appropriate times to commence work and finish work. It's done by a push button in the time office. They're given three minutes to get in at 8 o'clock anyone clocking in at 8.04 to 8.15 loses a quarter of an hour's pay. Out of a strength of 350 people you get only about 15 to 20 late of a morning. When everybody's clocked in I have to record a daily return to the factory manager of exactly who's in, who's away, who's sick, and who's absent. He has to have this 'parade state' as it were by 9.30 a.m.

No one can get in after 8.30 a.m. without permission. Sometimes there is bad time-keeping. But the bad timekeepers are always the same people. If they are late on too many occasions – say two or three times a week in a given period – then the superintendent of that department is informed. The habitual laters get away with it on a morning if the weather is bad."

So it's often a rush to get in, to beat the clock. At the end of the shift it's a rush too; a rush to clock your card. You know it's daft, that if you run you'll probably have to queue, and if you get out first you still have to wait on the bus but you do it. Everywhere and every day people rush to the time office.

In between the rush, they work; often against the clock. And this is no new thing either.

The clock in the workshop – it rests not a moment;

It points on and ticks on; eternity – time
Once someone told me the clock had a meaning, –

In pointing and ticking had reason and rhyme . . .

At times, when I listen, I hear the clock plainly; –

The reason of old – the old meaning – is gone.

The maddening pendulum urges me forward
To labour and still labour on.

The tick of the clock is the boss in his anger.
The face of the clock has the eyes of the foe.
The clock – I shudder – Dost hear how he draws me?

It calls me "machine" and it cries to me
"Sew"!

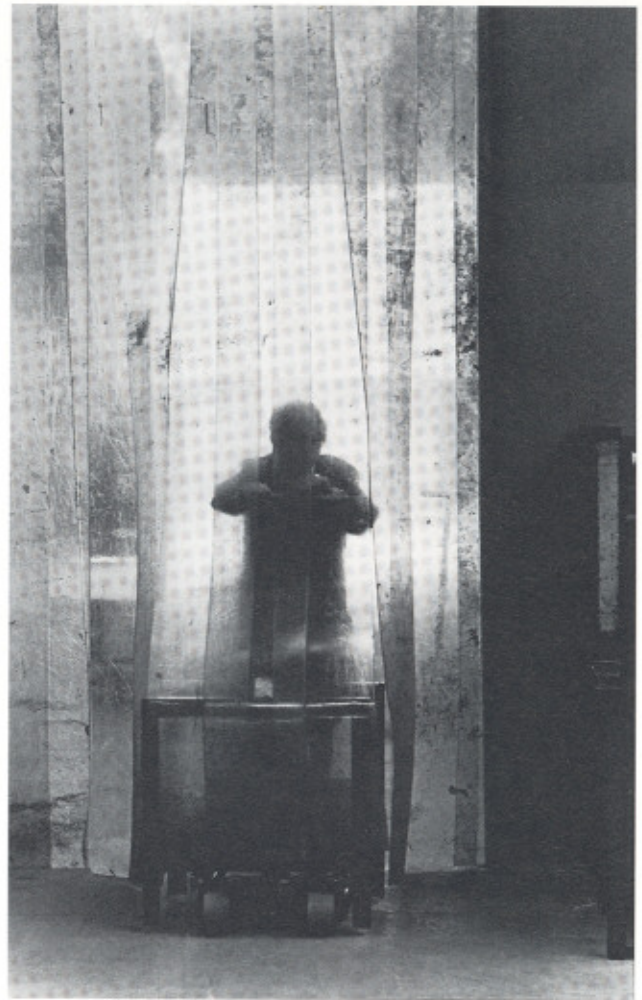
This poem was written in 1922, by a worker, a machinist in New York. It's a poem which, again, spans centuries of experience. For in the factory time is money; every minute is like gold and so, as Peter Currell Brown wrote in his satire of factory life:



"Every gramme of it is weighed and then the floor sweepings too, factories bulge with clocks . . . All these are controlled, so I gather, by a little 'master clock' which is kept in the manager's office. It tells all the clocks the time, and in a characteristically managerial sort of way, because factory clocks don't amble along in that friendly way of old clocks or clocks with second hands taking you steadily along from one minute to the next. Factory clocks jump. One minute it's 3.53 exactly, and just as you've begun to expect that all the clocks have stopped, it's suddenly 3.54 by every single one of them . . ."

That minute can, at times, seem like an eternity. And, having managed such eternities many times over, you learn their value. You remember exactly the time and day you started at this place.

"I started here on the fourth of the fourth sixty four . . . We work a shift system, Monday two to ten, Tuesday two to ten; Wednesday eight to four-thirty; Thursday, Friday and Saturday we do six to two. We have Sunday off. Then we



work Monday night and Tuesday night, nine-thirty to six; then Wednesday off and then back to Thursday afternoon. I've always worked shifts. But it's your living and you've got to look after your living."

This man, at 53, looked forward to retirement. "They may bring the retiring age down to 60 and I'd definitely welcome that." That thought fills much of his time working as a chipper and torch dresser. For that job (chipping out the defects in the finished bars) makes little demands upon his intelligence. For him, and many others – by far the majority of the factory workers – the demands of work are those associated with the monotony of repetition. It's a reality that's hard to hide from.

"I've worked here for 18 years. Always on the same kind of job. It's so boring. It's just very monotonous. I get no real satisfaction from the job. Can you imagine standing here in one place for eighteen years doing the same thing? If you look at it like that it's ridiculous."

So you try hard not to look at it like that. You tell



yourself that all mass production is boring, like school, but here at least you get paid for it. You know that.

"If you were to build a house or make a car then there's a finished object but to bob and polish a few handles!! There is *nothing* in it."

So you look forward to the end of the week because, "That's all that's in it for me; only what's in my pay packet."

This acceptance lies at the heart of the factory system. But it's difficult to live with. Especially if you're young.

"The job doesn't seem important to me at all. There doesn't seem any achievement. I don't want a fantastic career but I'd like to get something done. I feel like I'm dying here, smothering or something. I'm browned off practically every day . . . it's just the same old thing all around you; stretching out for ever. That's what gets me most I think – that it will go on for ever."

It's this endlessness that prompted one man –



a machine minder – to suggest that "someone must like working in factories". His friend's reply was pointed: "Don't be bloody daft. They just go on from day to day, week to week, year to year, and before they know where they are they're drawing their pensions."

In writing to factory workers, Karl Marx described how in the nineteenth century they became "living appendages" to the machine; how their labour represented increasingly the "carcass of time". In their hands, time was dead. During the twentieth century the carcass has been dissected down to its very tissue. To the factory clock and the time keeper have been added the alarm clock ("the first insult of the day" say some), and the clocking card has been supplemented by the stopwatch in the hands of the rate fixer. Under this superintendence, mechanised production spread. Factories became larger and in many areas replaced the workshops where craft and hand production had dominated. And with this came a new type of worker: a worker who, in the words of Henry Ford, "wants a job in which he doesn't have to put too much physical effort. Above all, he

wants a job in which he does not have to think." Other commentators (and many workers) were less sanguine in their views of the new industry. One, noting that "workers by the millions in mills and factories are being shaped to meet the demands of these rigid machines", issued a warning: the machine is more powerful than its maker. A thought that was shared by another man, 50 years later:

"Machine minders: official euphemism: machine operators. Official classification: semi skilled. Products of divided labour. Mill a bit here, drill a bit there. De-burr here, ream there. Spot face here, countersink there. Mill 700 items a day; drill 900 a day; spot face 2,700 a day. Seven-and-a-half-hour day – one half-hour meal break. Work like automatons, eat like pigs. Shifts 7.00 a.m. to 3.00 p.m. this week; 3.00 p.m. to 11.00 p.m. next . . .

I am to my machine what the eunuch was to the sultan: an enslaved impotent. The machine is an alien dictator. To call me an operator is to abuse the language. To operate on something implies control. And to argue that I 'control' my machine is to impose a very restricted meaning on the word . . . I am in the classical position of the slave. It is not surprising then that when my machine breaks down I have a feeling of elation. A temporary victory has been secured. The master has fallen. But only symbolically: he will rise again."

This then is another part of the 'class thing'. Having to work, you learn to cope with the tedium; to manage the monotony of an endless process that leads onward to retirement – or the dole. You learn to cope with the fact that "you're not paid to think", that "you're just a number", that "a monkey could do the job". You learn that you're a machine minder not an operator and that's why the pay is low. You cope with all this on top of the fact that;

"We [do] have to think; the supervisor expects us to, he hasn't time to do all the jobs for which we're not paid."

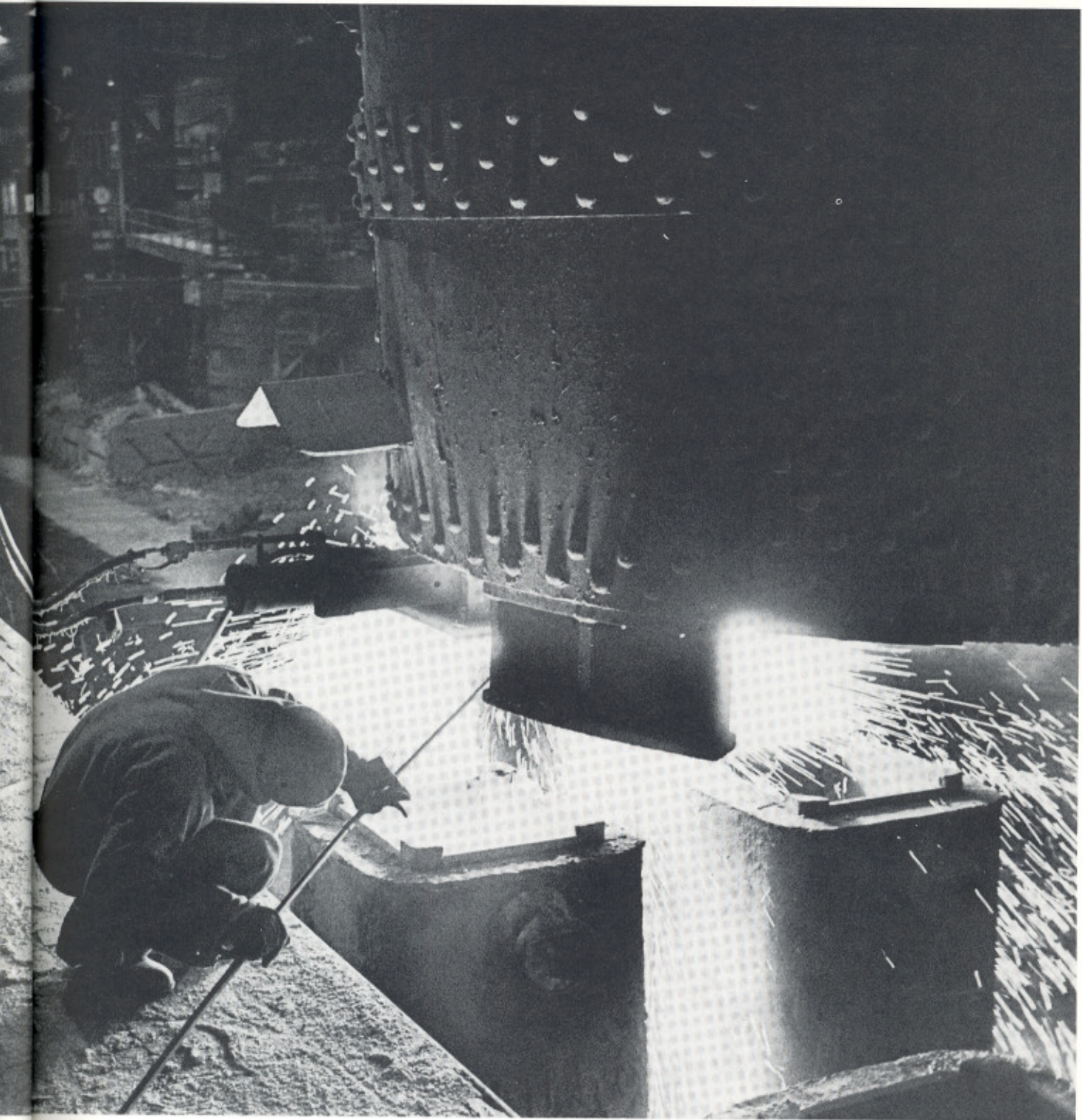
And that can be a rush too; especially if you're on piece rates.

In quieter times, when work is going smoothly your mind begins to wander. You find yourself thinking of things in the past, pleasant things perhaps, all mixed in with the future, with what you can do with your life when you're 'off the clock'. Often, too, your mind can fill up with worries. People who work on repetitive jobs talk of "things getting out of proportion"; of "dwelling on things". And



through all this there's the struggle to stay awake, to concentrate – through your detachment – upon being there. At moments, workers experience a feeling of no longer existing. Often it can be hard to contain.

"My nerves have been terrible since I came here. I've lost three stone altogether. I needed to I suppose but it's gone beyond a joke now. I'm getting really jumpy and very irritable too.



Especially when I'm at home, especially with my little brother. It gets everyone though. A girl on one of the belts near me went screaming around the department last week. It's doing the same thing day after day that does it."

Experiences of nervousness, of irritability and stress are not exceptional. Certainly not amongst the people who work on assembly lines.

"My job was to work on head-linings and I had to fasten a plastic-type material to the inside roof of the cars. I was doing this job for about two years and toward the end of it it was getting so bad that I could not relax at all. I could not get away from the job. Even in my dreams I seemed to be back on the track. It was putting a great strain on my home life. Everything on the track seemed to be a rush. Men would be running everywhere in an attempt to get a few

cars ahead so that, when the bell went for the end of tea break, you would have a few extra minutes to yourself. There just seemed no end to it. The assembly track would start running dead on 8.00 p.m. when I arrived for the night shift and it would not stop until exactly 10.30 when we would have a ten-minute tea break. By then the men, cramped together, fighting to get a few cars ahead on the track would be shouting and screaming at each other."

This man broke down under the strain and was advised by his doctor to "transfer from this sort of work". In car assembly however "this sort of work" is all there is. So if you stay - if you can stand it - your thoughts centre on getting through the day - or the night. For these factory hands, like factory hands through the century, work "is taken as given, like life itself, to be endured rather than enjoyed . . . a means to an end not an end in itself. The end, as much today as it was in 1900 is "survival in a hostile world which often seems to deny even this modest ambition".

In good times though, when jobs are relatively plentiful, and there's money to go around, you can stretch a bit: clear a bit of space in your life - in your job even. This happened in Europe and the USA in the 1960s. People began to demand more. So much so that in January 1974, Wilfred Jenks, the Director General of the International Labour Organisation in the United Kingdom argued that workers in Europe were becoming "dangerously bored". Their discontent had found expression in a number of ways: in the strike for sure, but also, and perhaps more significantly, in increases in absenteeism, in the tendency for workers to leave jobs they didn't like, in the rise of "poor workmanship". Jenks added the increases in delinquency, alcoholism and drug-taking to these "signs of unrest", and argued that they could "no longer be ignored or dismissed as the irresponsible behaviour of a younger generation which has had it too good too easily. The values, customs, and institutions of European society are failing to satisfy [their] aspirations . . . life has become too regimented, too impersonal, too monotonous, too frenzied and altogether too limiting and restricted for the present generation of Europeans." Sentiments such as these had persuaded Maurice MacMillan when he was Minister of Employment to set up an inquiry into the 'quality of working life', which in turn led Michael Foot to set up a Work Research Unit at the Department of Employment. Its Director, Gilbert Jessup, stated the problem concisely:

"Low motivation exists in a lot of firms in British industry because people are not involved in their work. This leads to a lot of real problems such as low productivity, absenteeism, high labour turnover and industrial unrest. We are predicting that these things will get worse if changes are not thought about now."

Full employment brought into the open a central problem of democratic capitalist societies. It brought home many of the contradictions inherent in the 'class thing'. It made clear that if working people find themselves in circumstances in which notions of 'freedom' and 'choice' make some degree of sense, they avail themselves of the option to refuse; they dispute with their 'betters', they go their own way. And there's the rub. 'Property' and 'democracy' - difficult bed-fellows still. To make the one real (to extend freedom in a meaningful way to all citizens) undoubtedly threatens the other. And so it was that business executives, government officials and trade union officers pre-occupied themselves with the problem of getting workers to accept what had previously been taken for granted - the needs of production, bad working conditions and tedium. In the end, though, unemployment restored the balance once again and - the struggle abated - interest in 'job satisfaction' and the 'problem of work' declined accordingly. Today, although it is clear that a large proportion of stress-related illness is a direct consequence of modern work processes and although "the total cost to industry . . . must be enormous . . . management in Britain is doing nothing." These are the words of US researcher Gary Cooper who added: "Forget the moral argument - they have not even done their sums to find what stress is costing them. I can count on the fingers of one hand those companies who have made a start."

In 1977 Margaret Thatcher, as part of her populist venture into Lancashire, launched the "best dressed teddy boy" competition in Manchester after visiting several local factories. In a Smith and Nephew's cotton mill, the deafening clatter of the machinery hindered conversation. The Tory leader yelled into the ears of workers, and smiled bravely, sometimes blankly, as they moved their lips in reply. As her party moved off, she remarked to the factory manager, "I suppose they learn to live with it." Maybe they do. But only because they have to; and in doing so they endure the costs.





The Noise Abatement Society insists that noise rated in excess of 80 decibels (db.) inflicts damage. The statutory level (made "as a concession to industry") is 90 decibels. The decibel scale is a geometric and not an arithmetic one; 90 decibels is not just ten above 80 decibels, but *ten times* noisier than the safe limit. "It is equivalent to working all day within twenty yards of a pneumatic drill going full blast."

Investigations at the Max Planck Institute in Dortmund found that the effect of noise upon the human body was a widespread one. It causes inflammation of the brain and of the stomach. It causes constriction of the blood vessels. Furthermore experiments have established that people's visual reactions drop by as much as 25 per cent when noise levels reach 90 db. In the USA 500 service men were submitted to noise of 90 db. intensity, at 1750 cycles per second, for 15 minutes. Afterwards 70 per cent suffered from a degree of colour blindness and for three quarters of them the margin of error in their vision had doubled.

Chipping and torch dressing in a steel works is a noisy job. Hammering away, taking all the defects out of the cold steel bars. They all tell you, "It's a very noisy job - chipping. It affects your hearing." They tell you that, "If someone talks quietly it's a job to take in every word." It's a noisy job, so the company issued ear muffs.

"They deaden the sound a bit, but not very much really. Also they could be dangerous. You can't hear the hooters from the cranes as they come over. So they can be hazardous as well as safe."

Another irony; another part of the 'class thing'. In 1980 *The Times* pointed out that, "serious occupational psychology has now moved firmly away from faddish interest in the managers' problems." While research and

discussion had long centred on "executive stress" and the "problems of jet lag":

"The broad picture, from mortality data in Britain [shows that] in most cases, from accidents to heart disease, the 'blue collars' are at greater risk than the 'white collars'."

Noise is one thing; stress another. All coming together around the ever present machine - fierce metal in motion. It's been estimated that a person who works in a factory can expect two severe, disabling accidents during a working life. Hands that work with metal run the danger of losing fingers.

"The rollers stopped and we called out downstairs 'What's going on?' So Joe went to see to save time - but then they stopped the chute as well, see? So now the rollers down here won't start either. The shaker wouldn't start. But then the blokes up there started up the chute and it was all coming down again, see. So Joe climbed across the rollers and pushed the start button. And his finger caught in a roller like that you see. As soon as the rollers started up he lost his footing and all his weight came down on the finger and he just dropped and pulled it off like that."

And in the steel industry a finger figured quite low in the compensation stakes - £200 for a complete amputation. In that industry you know that you take your *life* in your hands when you go to work.

"At any time out there whether morning noon or night, any of the operators can lose their life. You can be just walking around the furnace and anything can happen. Sometimes we missed death by just seconds. You have to trust your luck coming up these steps. When you are looking at the risks involved, this job stands somewhere between working in a chemical plant and a coal mine. Three men are



still on the 'box', badly injured. The furnace burst and a man standing close by caught fire. He was blazing. If we lost a second he would be dead."

On the factory floor, accidents and deaths are legion. One thousand workers are killed each year at their place of work; another thousand die as a direct consequence of the effect of that place on their health. Countless more simply die at work: "on the job deaths" is the term used in the USA to cover this category of fatality. Breathing in fumes; working in dust, in oil and chemicals; in modern factories, *work* is a positive danger to health. A danger that is kept concealed behind security gates and fences. The extent of this separation came over clearly in Bristol in 1972. The RTZ smelter at Avonmouth had secreted an emission of highly toxic gasses into the atmosphere. The company admitted this. But on television their spokesman calmed the local BBC interviewer with the assurance that the people of the area had no need to fear; the danger was "contained within the confines of the plant". Occasionally the barrier – between inside and outside the factory gates – is broken. Sometimes dramatically. In 1974 the Nypro (UK) plant at Flixborough – a plant ostensibly producing fertiliser – erupted. Twenty-eight workers were killed and houses up to four miles distant were damaged. People thereabout were convinced by the plant convenor's claim that there is a huge question mark against the term 'safe chemical plant'."

More often the dangers of factory work are revealed to outsiders in quieter ways.

"My missus is always going mad at me about smoking: 'You're going to have lung cancer.' I says: 'Cock, you come down our place in the shut down [holidays].' She came up the back steps with us and she walked in. It was a sunny day, no furnace was on, but you could see stuff coming through the roof. She got hold of me

and she said: 'Bill, smoke as many as you want'."

But he still coughs. Bronchitis, emphysema, lung cancer these are the diseases that attack the lungs and to which industrial workers are vulnerable. The steel industry is particularly bad:

"Now I'm getting on and I've got an industrial disease: sand on my lungs. Instead of my lungs being able to function properly I can only take shorter breaths. I used to go dancing ever such a lot; I go on the floor now once or twice and I have to sit down. I used to swim a lot, but now I can just about get across the width. If I ever have to do a lot of running about here it can knock me out for about half-an-hour. If I get a touch of flu it can really knock me – my legs go."

It took decades of struggle before pneumoconiosis – the black lung of the miner – was recognised as an occupational disease. Today it's being admitted that the lungs of other workers are also affected by the contamination of the job. Welders are particularly vulnerable. In modern industry,

"The welder uses high temperatures and may work in enclosed spaces and be exposed to nitrous fumes, ozone and other noxious products . . . chest clinics saw patients apparently disabled at an early age by emphysema without a history of smoking." But no one is really excluded from risk. As *chemicals* became a central part of more and more industrial processes so too have increasing numbers of work places and work people become vulnerable to the effects of fumes and toxicity.

The introduction of these substances into the work place has been remarkable for its lack of detailed regulation and supervision. A measurement developed in the USA and

known as Threshold Limit Value has been applied to some substances – about 500 of them – but others, and there are literally thousands of these, have not been tested at all. As it is, the TLVs themselves are a slightly disturbing measurement. The official statement tells us that:

“Threshold Limit Values refer to airborne concentrations of substances and represent conditions under which it is believed that nearly all workers may be repeatedly exposed day after day without adverse effects.”

However,

“Because of wide variation in individual susceptibility, a small percentage of workers may experience discomfort from some substances at concentrations at or below the threshold limit; a smaller percentage may be affected more seriously by aggravation of a pre-existing condition or by the development of occupational illness.”

In Britain, the Workers Education Association made a critical examination of the people covered under such phrases as “nearly all workers” and “a small percentage”. It pointed out that the TLVs are derived from tests based upon US army recruits (“arguably the fittest and healthiest section of the American population”) and therefore have direct applicability only to workers who are both young and male. In the WEA’s view women workers (with their – on average – lower body weight) and older men face disproportionate risks when working with toxic substances.

“This is a terrible shop to work in. In all the years that I’ve worked, I’ve never known it where you’ve got die-casting and the fumes in the same area as other people. In winter on a heavy day it chokes you. There’s been one or two people that’s left. This pollution’s no good anywhere is it? We get a lot in the Midland area anyway. It’s obviously not good for your health is it?”

It certainly isn’t. And as the ‘economic crisis’ deepens there is every reason to suspect that the bodies of workers are increasingly being put at risk. Commenting on a dramatic rise in accidents in the construction industry, for example, the Health and Safety Executive noted:

“It is possible that economic pressures may have resulted in general lowering in the degree of control and supervision of safety on site,

and an increase in the practice of undercutting at the expense of safety . . . It is most important that companies should not cut costs at the expense of safety if this rising toll of fatalities is to be halted and reversed.”

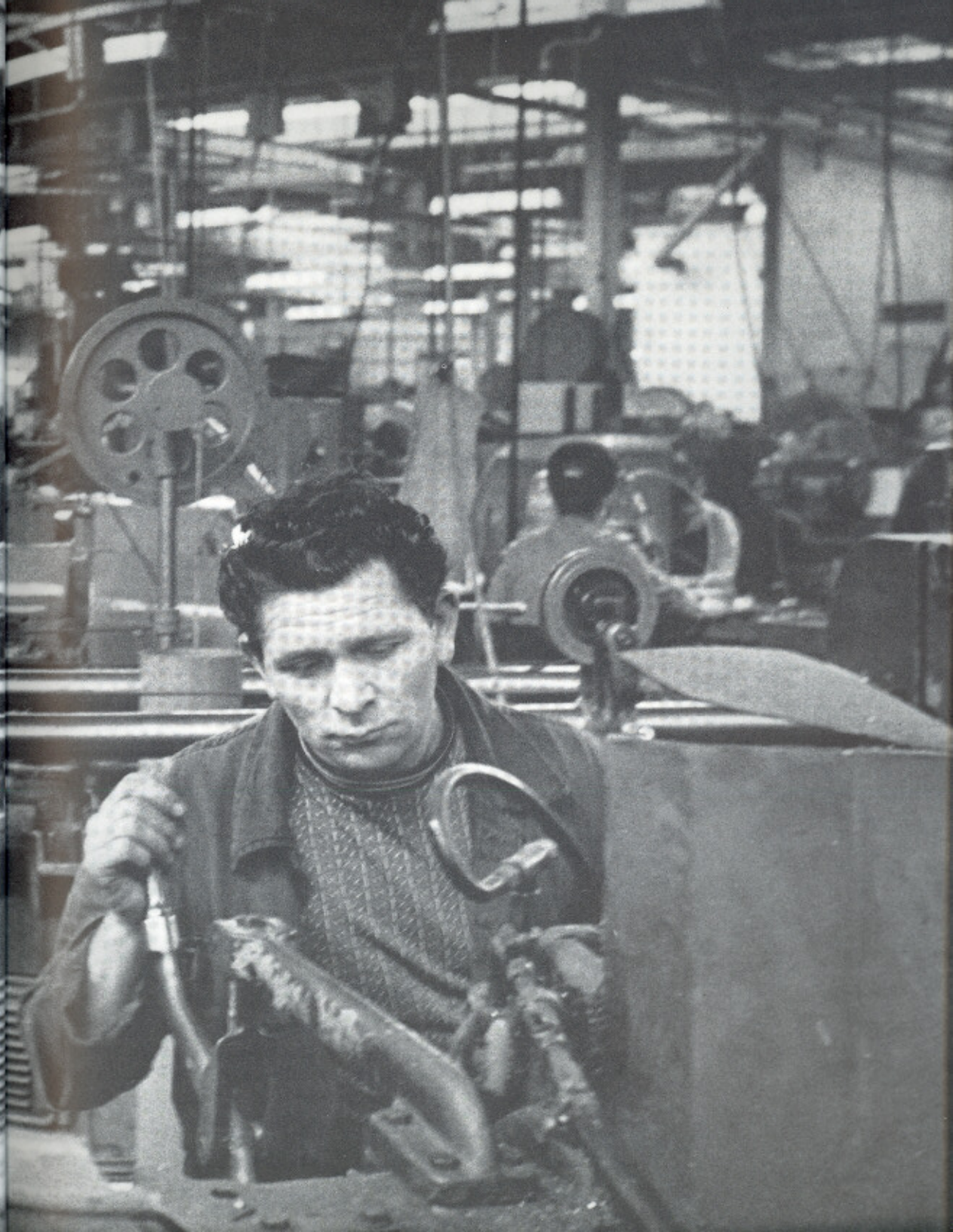
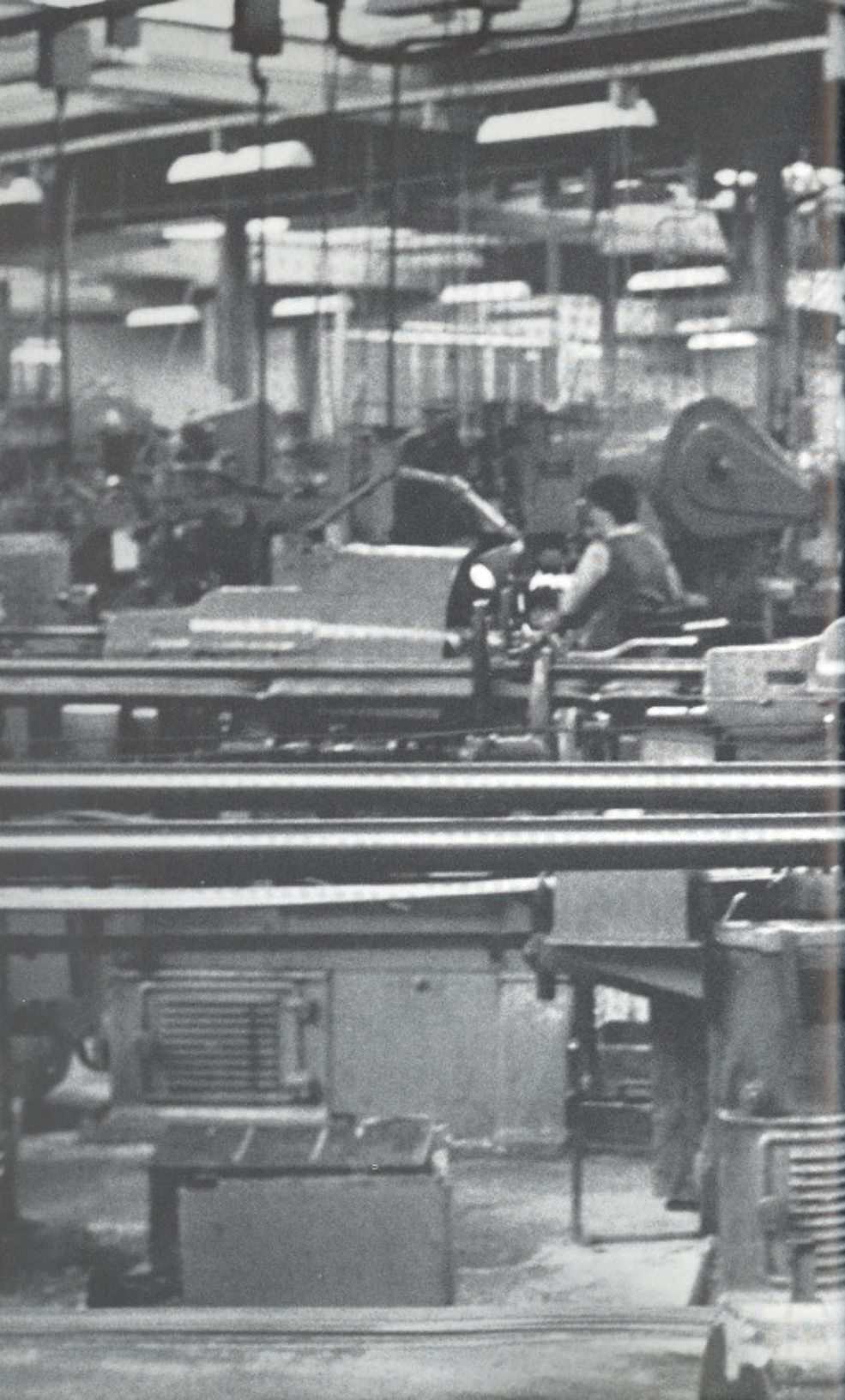
Meanwhile old men remember the old days and struggle on.

“The conditions here at onetime was nobody’s business. I went to Blackpool on the first holiday I’d ever had, not long ago. I took my wife and two kids, and I was spitting black for a week. You had to swallow the coal dust and the sulphur in this place. There was no lavatories no wash basins. But I know if I go to work I can go in the pub on a Friday night and I can keep my head up high without anyone saying that he’s a scrounger, and I can give my wife what she is entitled to. I say to myself, ‘Joe, get up and go.’ I have very bad arthritis and the specialist told me I have to have willpower. I’ve got this old bike and I always cycle to work.”

Throughout the Midlands, walking around factories, talking to people, you are impressed by a deep sense of how work places and the people in them are undergoing change. In all this, steel men still talk of their skill, of the drama of productions as the hot iron is turned to steel, sampled, then tapped on the pitside. A drama that cuts through the sweat, that allows for concentration on the task and even an inner tranquility. Machine minders don’t talk this way. In their world the clock and the machine have turned drama into farce. It was an awareness of this – this discrepancy between ‘trades’ – which led one retired melter to write:

“My trade is a good trade and I left plenty of fellows on the melting shop who think the same as I do. The same fellows are hoping that the vast changes in steel production will not be catastrophic for them, that their trade will still be interesting because it will still need their skill. I hope so too, for their sakes very much so, but I wonder. The day of the open hearth furnace, I think, is closing in slowly but surely, and the industry will see the biggest transformation in its history long before the end of the century. The whole contours of the steel making shops as we know them today will go too, and I’m just a little sad about it. It is in the slowness of the open-hearth process that a melter finds the time to use his skill. How can he be skillful or why should his skill be needed when instant steel making gets going properly? I wish I knew the answer, but maybe it’s better that I shouldn’t.”







The end of an era. In the Midlands, metal workshops, built on a century or more of skill and backbreaking endeavour went through a similar process of change. This man was a padlock repairer. He remembers how:

"I was 14 when I first started here. I've been here 44 years. We worked 47½ hours a week now, it's 37½. I started in 1932 – bad days. But for that I think I should have gone into something different – at school I used to get 100 per cent for practical drawing. But I had to take the first job that became available. You had to work in those days, if you didn't you got a cussing."

He was trained as a locksmith, specialised in cylinder work, and he's done it all his life. He smiles as he thinks of the men who trained him – the "old locksmiths". He remembers how Willenhall was known as "Humpshire" because:

"The locksmith stood by the bench all day long, and over the years it sent them bent double. They just stood there, just working continually. Everyone used to wear white aprons. I can remember my old grandad when the shift came out – he always had the one side of his apron in his mouth. We used to work in groups: just one man, a lad and a girl. One

group would be given an order to complete. Not assembling; not like today."

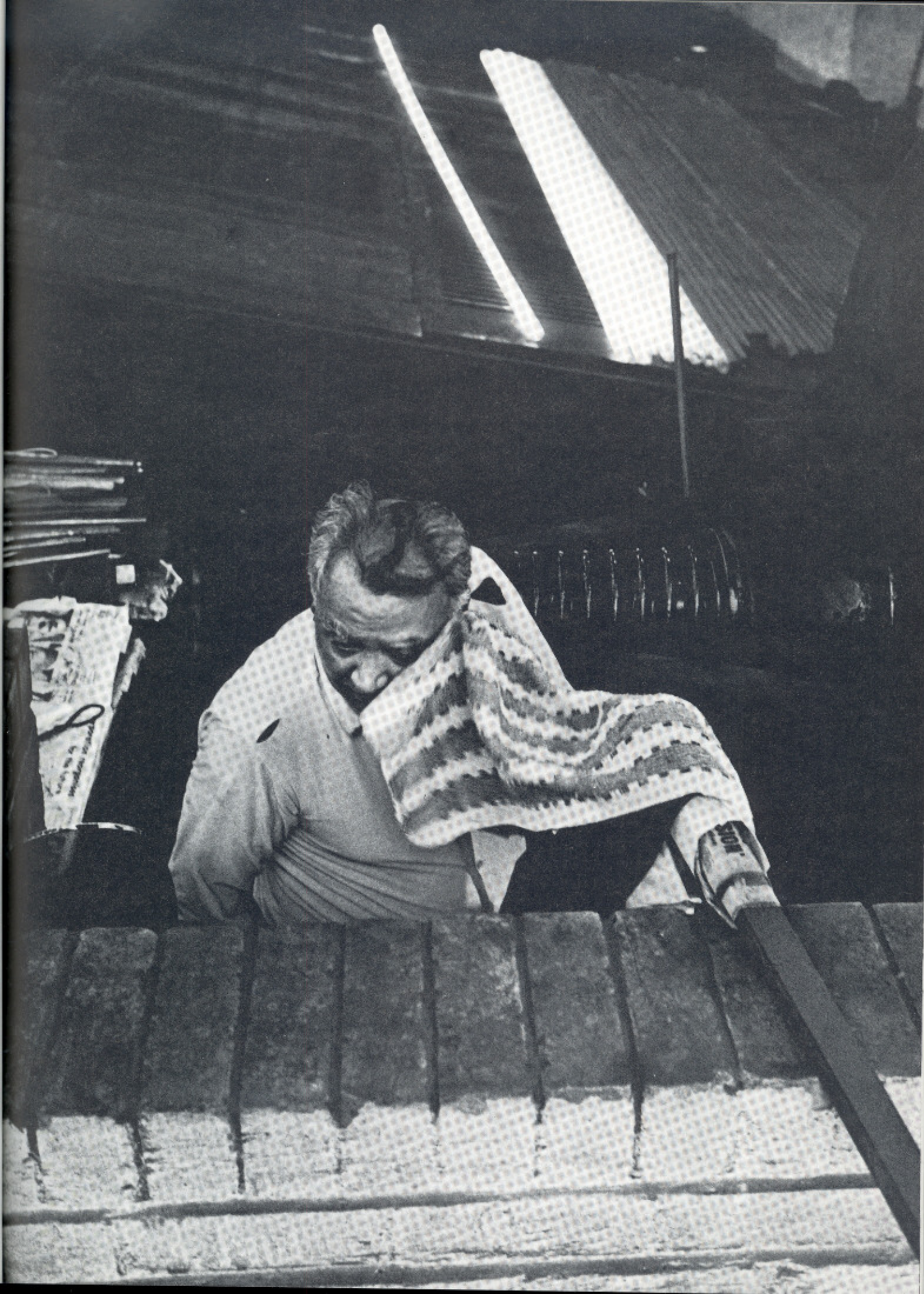
Today in contrast:

"The main object is speed of production. Nobody's feelings are taken into account. They're on the look-out all the while to speed up production; speed merchants."

He says the word disdainfully; for he truly hates the change which has seen production build around speed, rather than quality; where a new generation of workers can laugh at any idea of pride or responsibility or purpose in work and where *you* are devalued.

"It's a bit narking for us in fact, they turn out rubbish and we're the people who have to put them right. We're doing somebody else's work all the while. Yet we're just nobodies. They don't think about the work now, they think about the money. It makes you lose pride in your work. In the old days the bosses were interested in what you were doing but nowadays they steer clear."

In the face of this he has turned his back on work. He's "taken up dancing and I really enjoy it. It's fantastic isn't it?" He's thankful too that his two children are out of the factories: "They both work in offices and I'm pleased for them."





New Faces

The blast furnace at the Bilston steel works was quite volatile and unpredictable. You didn't know what it would do next. It was commissioned in 1953, the year of the Coronation, and given the name Elizabeth. This, thought the men, was doubly appropriate: "The way it was we had to give it a woman's name, it being so temperamental and that." There's a lot in a name. And this one is no exception. It tells of the relationship between the sexes and how, in our society, 'work' became the preserve of men. While women were established in the 'home', factories became the embodiment of masculinity and a male culture, created in the *absence of women*. Steel works and pits; docks; railways; and a whole range of metal and engineering workshops were built around a world of men alone. White men alone.

And this is something else that has changed. As technical processes altered, so too have the workers who run them. In the 1960s and 70s new faces appeared on the factory floors in the Midlands. Black faces and female faces. A dramatic change but not unique.

In the nineteenth century, women workers

predominated not only in textiles but were found, in large numbers, in a variety of other branches of industry. In 1864 for example the Children's Employment Commission estimated that 10,000 females were employed as workers in the metal trades in Birmingham: women were reported to be a dominant force in the light chain trade, in lacquering in the brass trade and also in the metal pen factories of the city. So too in Coventry where, by the end of the century, the cycle industry employed an increasing number of women, as did watch making and engineering generally. As new techniques of production were introduced to trade after trade, women's work spread more broadly across the occupation range.

Women needed jobs and in those jobs they, as newcomers, were most often severely exploited. Such was the extent of the exploitation (through low wages, long hours and poor and insanitary conditions) that other workers – often men organised in skilled trades and often threatened by female 'dilution' – argued strongly in favour of restrictions upon the employment of women in industry. The third Trades Union Congress in 1877, declared that, "It was the duty of men



and husbands to bring about a condition of things when their wives should be in their proper sphere at home instead of being dragged into competition of livelihood with the great and strong men of the world." The problem of female exploitation was to be solved by excluding women from factories. Sentiments like these, allied with more general concerns over the breakdown of working-class family life and 'morality', were implanted in legislative reforms that cohered within Victorian respectability. Companies like Cadbury's at Bournville employed single girls up until the day they were married. The Co-op too. Marriage became the institution that linked women inexorably with the home and domestic work; that firmly established their economic dependence upon men.

However this 'solution' in no way helped the unmarried: a group which, in 1911, made up almost half of all women, and 80 per cent of those under the age of 25. For these people a wage was necessary for a living, and the factories – bad as many of them were – had certain advantages over the alternative of domestic service. And so as the 'male trades' were changed the employers looked to cheap female labour to run the new processes. So too did the tradesmen resent the incursion and blame the women. Often this led to open disputes and in the early part of this century such an occurrence took place at a brass works in Birmingham. It centred on the question of brass polishing:

"The trades union pronounced polishing to be filthy and exhausting work, and degrading to women, and declared the employers only wanted to set women on for the sake of cheapness. The employers on the other hand said the union only opposed the employment of women because they wanted to keep women out of the trade as much as possible."

As this observer, B. L. Hutchins, commented: "Probably motives were mixed on both sides." She backed this with the assured observation that, "The hardest and most unhealthy work may be done by women without a protest from the men's unions if it does not bring women evidently into competition with men." To this she added: "Nothing can clear up the situation but the enlightenment and better organisation of women themselves." Something of this burst forth at the Cradley chain works in 1910, where women were employed on a wage of 1 penny an hour; 12 pence recompense for a twelve-hour shift in the workshop. This wage was a minimum rate established under the

1909 Trades Board Act. The employers at Cradley decided to opt out of even that minimum. The union with the help of the Federation of Women Workers struck and won. The official history of the Birmingham Trade Council acknowledges the importance of this struggle:

"The effect of this victory should not be underestimated. The thought swept through the working-class that if these unorganised, depressed women could organise and win, then almost every other section, however poor and subservient, could do the same. It sparked off an emulative feeling. It gave a spurt to the growing militancy, comparable with the effects the Match Girls' victory in 1889 had had upon the movement."

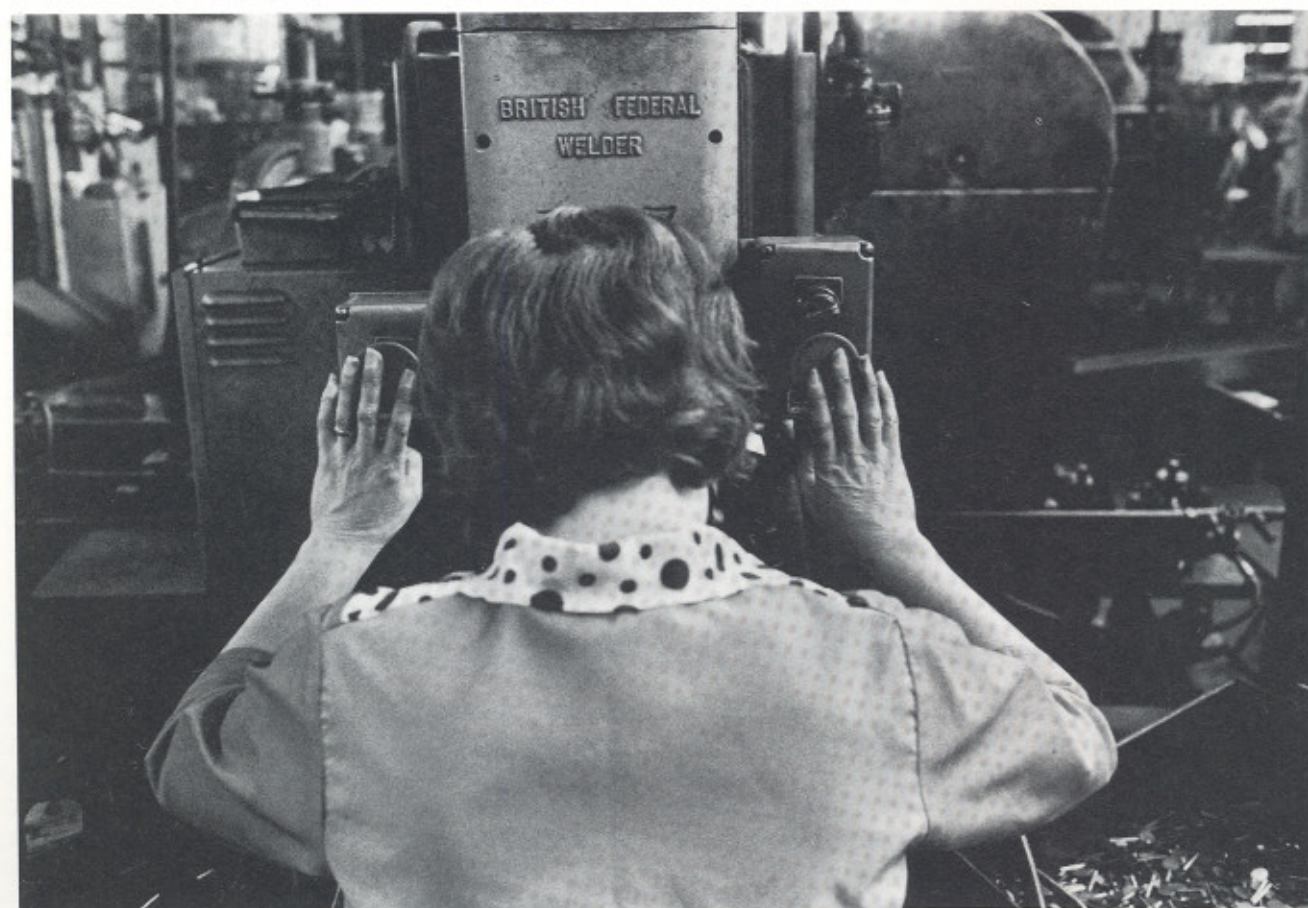
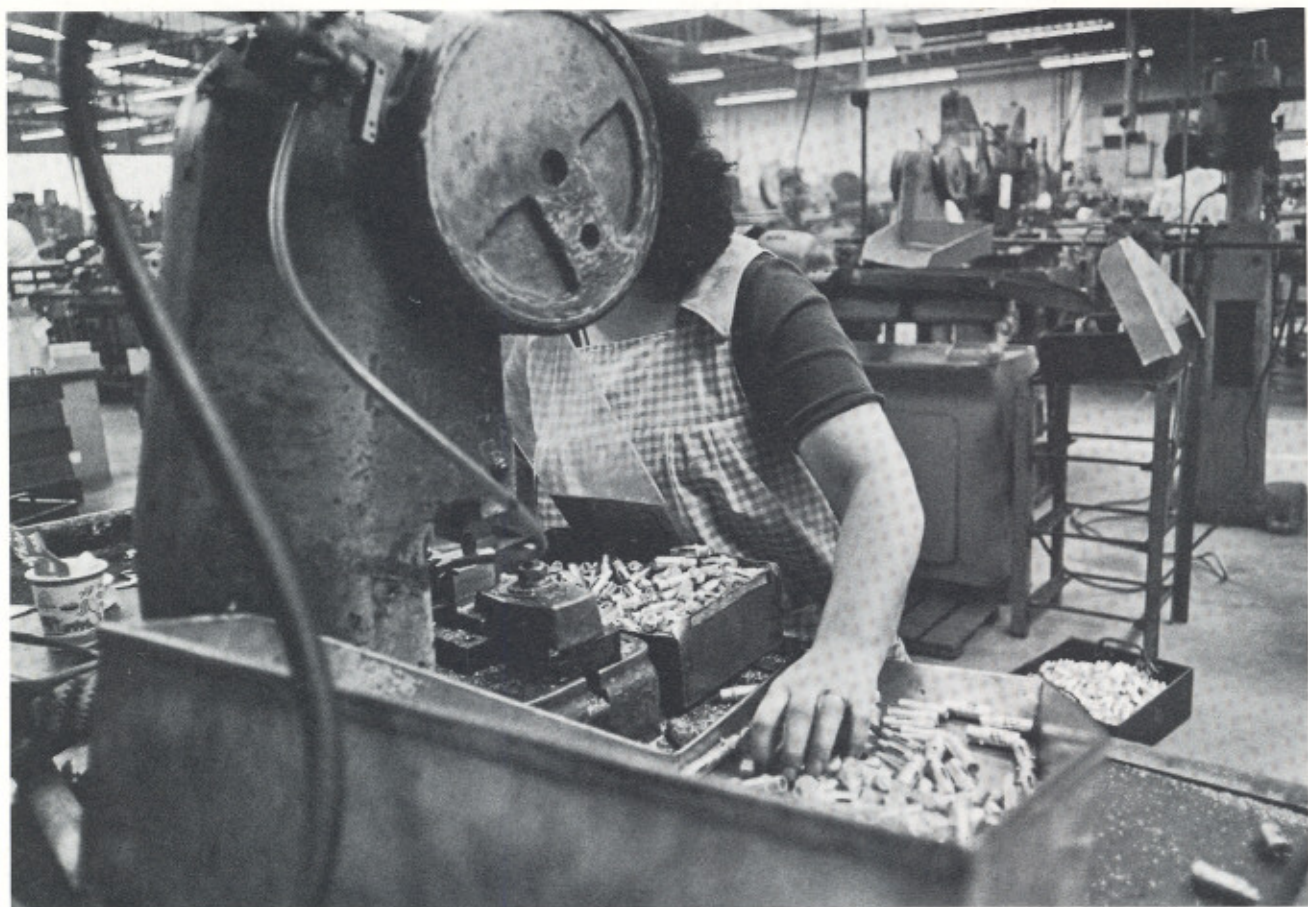
A major achievement, and one which was redoubled in the war years that followed. Women – married or not – worked extensively in all major branches of industry; they joined trade unions; they produced and they organised. But the post-war years, reaffirmed the views (held by employers and trade unions alike) that a woman's place was with her family. A view that was reinforced by the depression. In 1931 just 10 percent of married women were in employment (the same as in 1911) and just a third of the people on payrolls were female. Again – and with the advent of war – the pattern changed. But this time the decades that followed war – particularly the boom years of the late sixties – saw women more strongly established in work places. By the mid 1970s women made up 40 percent of the labour force. Far from returning to the home, half of the country's 'wives' were in paid employment and two-thirds of women workers were 'wives'. Between 1971 and 1976 one million women left home for work in a factory or office, in a school canteen or hospital.

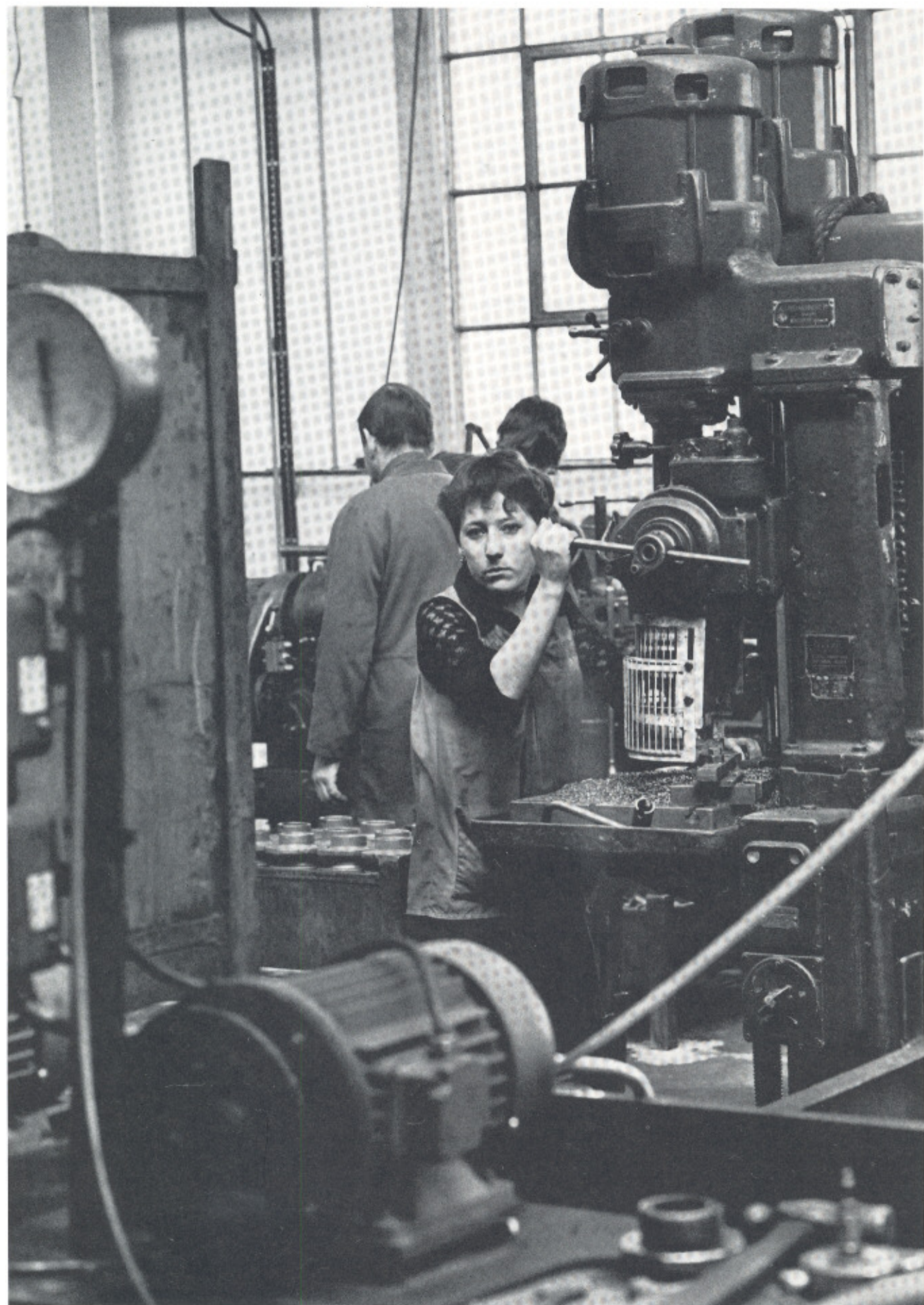
Quite a change. It was in the view of the *Sunday Times*, a "quiet revolution". So powerful and sustained has been this incursion of women into paid employment that it is difficult not to consider it a change of fundamental importance. Some sociologists gave substance to this as they talked of a "symmetrical family" and argued that while, before the war, "it was not a man's place to do women's work any more than the other way round . . . that has now changed. Wives are working outside the home in what is much less a man's world than it used to be." Such a view needs qualifying however. Particularly in the light of a conclusion in the Department of



Employment's report on the position of women in paid employment to the effect that "it has deteriorated quite markedly in some respects". The report points to the fact that in 1911, 24 percent of employed women worked in skilled jobs; the percentage today is just half of this. In 1911 too, a higher proportion of

women found places in the higher paid managerial and administrative jobs. In contrast, while only 15 per cent of women's jobs were of the low paid, dead end, no prospects, "married women" kind in 1911, 60 years (and a quiet revolution) later the proportion had risen to 37 percent.





This latest 'expansion of opportunity' for women has been highly selective. It has contained them effectively within particular narrow sections of employment. In sewing rooms, typing pools and canteens, in the 'nursing profession' and in domestic service, women make up 90 percent of the workforce. They occupy an area of employment that has been termed the "job ghetto". Two thirds of women workers have been placed there, in jobs which have been called the "ten deadly Cs" – catering, cleaning, clerking, counter-minding, clothes-making, coiffure, childminding (primary school teaching), clothes washing, care of the sick, and clicking of typewriters. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that "British employers' attitudes have changed little where women are concerned". (*The Times*, 30 March 1981):

"They employ large numbers of them but mainly in low status, low paid jobs – as secretaries, clerks, cleaners or factory assembly hands. Despite the passing of two Acts designed to change this and even though increasing numbers of women go out to work, things are not getting much better. In some ways they are becoming worse. The gap between women's and men's pay has widened and the Equal Pay Act cannot be invoked unless a woman can find a man doing similar work with whom to compare herself. This is impossible for large numbers of women in exclusively female jobs."

This was borne out in a report by the Equal Opportunities Commission in 1978. Based upon information received from 575 of the leading companies in Britain it concluded that little progress had been made, or was likely to be made, in the direction of "genuine sex equality". Only a quarter of the companies surveyed had written equal opportunity policies and while 39 percent had analysed their workforce according to sex, only 4 percent had used this information to monitor progress on equality. In almost all the companies, what the Commission termed the "wider issues of equal opportunities" had been examined hardly at all: "Indeed they may not even have been acknowledged as issues" in the company board rooms. Throughout industry, job segregation was still a commonplace yet only seven of these 575 employers had used the provisions of the Sex Discrimination Act to apply positive discrimination in favour of women.

This separation is often justified by the innate characteristics of the sexes: women

take over jobs that best reflect their domestic skills – men team the steel while women serve the meals in canteens. Frequently though the divisions aren't that clear cut and here the essentially arbitrary nature of the divisions and the wage differentials become even clearer. In bakeries for example:

"The women put the meat and the onions into the pies and the men put the potatoes on top, and for working with onions instead of potatoes the women get 82 percent of the male rate."

'Men's jobs' and 'women's jobs' still. And what this has meant – in factories – is that women's experience of work there has been of a total and unbridled tedium. Like in the dairy. There the women work as fillers or inspectors. On the fillers you're "on the go all the while" moving the bottles, checking the feed. A pint at a time; gallon upon gallon an hour. Inspection is just "a boring job". You just watch. One woman there talked of a job she had had earlier in her life. It was in the catering trade, where she had been a cake decorator:

"Decorating wedding cakes, christening cakes, birthday cakes. There was something different every day. It was interesting. The money was no good; but the interest was. I could have worked twenty-four hours doing that quite happily. Not like this job. I get no satisfaction from this job. None at all."

Melters and locksmiths talk with feeling about their *involvement* in a work process; they deeply regret the passing of an older – better – time. Few women talk in this way. (How many women, for all the talk of "domestic skills", work as chefs?) Lacking such an established place in the factory system, factory work involves for them now much the same as it did for their mothers. As another survey of employers' attitudes made clear:

"There was widespread acceptance of job segregation in manual jobs and strong views on the suitability of certain jobs for men (those involving lifting or mechanical tasks) and for women (those involving dexterity or monotonous work)."

Department of Employment Gazette, July 1978

Dexterity and monotony: a combination based on the proverbial nimbleness of the female hand and the most rigorous implementation of mass production assembly techniques. A process that distorts the human



body; that reduces – figuratively and in practice – the female workers to a pair of hands. A dextrous pair of hands can, in the assembly of components for record players, complete 300 separate assemblies in an hour. *Five a minute.* Appeasers will tell you that such women don't mind the work, that it isn't a strain, that in fact many women prefer such jobs as they place no demands, no responsibilities, upon them. The women themselves tell a different story. "Can you see a man doing this job day in day out?" they ask. "They wouldn't take the boredom and having to sit all day on their backsides staring into a light all day. It's soul destroying isn't it?" They talk of feeling "physically drained when you go home". They talk of the pace of work, of the pressure:

"You're a cabbage feeding a damn monster. You get to a point when you can't remember your own name. You're *so bored.*"

Bored yet committed: committed to the job in a way which talk of 'pin money' fails to comprehend. They are committed to the job

because (single or married) they (themselves or their families) need the money.

"I come to work to help my family, to give my family, like my son, a better chance. So that we can have the extra things out of life: colour telly, run a car, save some money on the side for my son when he gets older, he's eight now. If he comes in and says, 'Mum can I have so and so,' I like to give it to him. Me working, and my husband working, we can afford to make a better life for him."

A better life based upon a factory wage, and a factory job. They recognised this clearly. "If I chucked this in it would only be another factory job, and all factory jobs are the same." They recognise too that *their* jobs carry no prestige, no status, no *worth*:

"The majority of the girls don't like to own up to being factory workers – not even to themselves. They don't like to because we feel low; we feel it's a degrading kind of job. When I'm here I think about the night time. I think about my house – it's my dream in life."

The circle is complete. Established in the home women compete on unequal terms for jobs. Boring, tedious jobs reaffirm the domestic dream. Yet the centre of the circle remains the subordinate position of women in our society. This is what flaws the reality of so many dreams and enforces the pressure in so many work places. The Workers Education Association noted the findings of one of the few surveys into the pressures faced by women working on machine-paced assembly-line jobs. It showed that women working on such jobs were likely to have problems with their menstrual cycle and to find it more difficult to conceive. The researchers concluded, "The continuous emotional stress associated with [these jobs] presents an occupational risk for the emotional balance of women." And factory nurses often pick up the casualties:

"These days they work a lot faster and they've got more people telling them to increase production. There's been a big increase in stress since the introduction of measured day work . . . it's the women who suffer most, because they're doing two jobs."

Two jobs, one the mirror of the other. Two jobs because you need the money. Two jobs because you know (and again surveys on mental health bear this out) that to stick to one would drive you around the bend.



Women then: wives and mothers; factory hands. Doing two jobs, caring for children and feeding the machine. While on the job – part-time or full-time – they are regulated more than most by the demands of the clock. As such ‘going to work’ becomes a complicated affair. Mothers and mothers-in-law play a part: “She sees to him during the day: she gets him up, washes him, dresses him, sends him to school, and she is there when he comes home from school.” Without such help women often pay other women, and in doing so incur the risk of disapproval:

“She left work on the Thursday and had the baby on the Monday. She’s back here again in two weeks. The baby’s in the nursery, she’s got to pay £8 a week to keep that baby in the nursery.”

Sometimes it seems like you can’t do right for doing wrong. Certainly there’s no doubting the assessment that, one way or the other, “a working woman’s job is a nerve racking thing.” This is true for all women, it’s particularly true if you’re black and immigrant. One woman described in a letter to *Race Today* how:

“In the West Indies, women don’t go out to work at all. It’s only when we came to Britain that we really knew what going to work was like – toiling from 8 o’clock in the morning, until half

past five, then coming home in another rush. It’s a problem to go out to work and get the children looked after . . . Back home, if a child needs looking after they have their grandmother, grandfather, uncle, auntie, cousin everybody.”

Paid low wages, yet determined to save, “to send money back to Ja”, to repay the money they borrowed for the air ticket, or help maintain their families, 70 percent of West Indian mothers were in employment in 1971. In their talk they share with other working mothers the problem of “doing two jobs”. Frequently these women – black and white – contrast their lives with the position of ‘a husband’ who:

“gets up in the morning, gets dressed, has a cup of tea and a slice of bread and butter, kisses the kids ‘Ta-ta’ and tells his wife he’ll see her at six. The wife has to get up maybe half an hour before the husband to make the breakfast, get the children ready for school and perhaps a daughter ready for the office – and she may have to be out by half-past-seven to get into the factory at eight. She’s trying to organise, tidy up and make sure the house is secure as well before she goes out. Then she’s thinking ‘In my dinner hour I’ve got to go out and do the shopping’ – after working for five hours in the factory in the morning. On the way





to work she's nearly getting killed crossing busy roads. On the way home she can see her machine in her eyes; she can't get work out of her head, and she has to worry about getting the dinner on. Perhaps the children finish school at four and she doesn't finish till five, so she worries about whether they come home safe from school as well. On top of all this, there are some husbands who think that just because they're given a week's wages, their washing should be done, their home cleaned and their children well-dressed. And if the wife can't afford to buy herself clothes, she starts to go down and begins to look like an old hobo because she can't afford a nice dress to go out in. Then the husband doesn't bother about her, so he goes out drinking with his mates.

Women in factories are sweating their guts out for their children. Although they say they got rid of the whip years ago they still have the whip behind us really. They're still whipping us, in another way."

And the whip takes its toll:

"I think it has took a lot out of my life working here. I've always been a jolly person and it's almost as if it's stopped. I'm a scrat, called a scrat, it means a grabber. You lose a lot of family life. My daughter was nine when I came

here; I didn't want to come to work but you want the luxuries. But there is no one there to rub her hair if it is wet. You miss out on all that, I think every married woman worker does. You can't be here seven and a half hours a day, go home and do exactly the same work and look after your family in a matter of three hours of a night time. You lead two different lives going to work. But I wanted her to look nice, I wanted her to have more than I ever did. But I'm not a nasty grabbing person. I like a laugh and I like a joke. For a few minutes we have a little laugh and giggle; but then it's back to the bobbing. I thought when I left school, 'I'm going to meet some handsome fellow and he is going to take me off on his white charger.' When you're at school you think all kinds of things. Recently I was reading my husband's love letters he wrote to me when he was in the army. I'd told him I'd had a cold and I had to go to work the next day; he said, 'Never mind darling you won't have to go out to work much longer.' I've worked ever since. When you leave school you start work. Then it's fantastic – aye it is when you first start work – you're getting some money, you can go out, you can buy what you like, then you start courting and you think, 'Ooh I ain't going to work for long.' I thought 'This is going to be it when I got married.' But it wasn't like that, nothing at all like that."

Capitalist development is never a smooth process. Accumulation and exploitation; slum and boom; inflation, depression: it's a familiar enough story. So too the pattern of 'technical progress', as old industries and trades are wiped out and others, in turn, recruit less skilled, lower paid workers. It's a story that runs through the second part of this book; it's a story that unites it with this account of 'new workers'. For, as steel workers and locksmiths watched their skills become more and more the redundant appendage to new processes, so did other, female, workers swell the unskilled assembly operations in the electrical engineering industry. In periods like the sixties and seventies, the convenience of having a proportion of the adult population on call as a potential labour force became clear. Women established in the home could, under the right conditions, be enticed out of it. And by extortion, the process could be reversed. But there's the problem. Capital develops by putting labour to work. It develops by pulling people off fields and into factories; out of factories and into supermarkets. It develops by playing upon that immense stock of potential that is locked up within human endeavour and experience. But this human force – adaptable as it may be – is not infinitely malleable. It has a life of its own, a life that carries on outside of the grip of capital. As such 'it' can 'refuse'. And there's the rub – for capital.

To establish mothers in factories and offices is to risk creating women who have a changed understanding of marriage, of romance and of femininity. In changing people, capital runs the risk of creating a social and potential situation which it cannot readily control. Certainly, the tension created in the post-war period within the family and the woman's place in it can be seen as a central political element in British society. Another has been the presence of significant numbers of black people, in some cities and workplaces. Here too (while the processes are in no sense identical) the changing structure of industry played a decisive role.

Africa and Asia as continents have contributed more than most to the migratory pattern of labour which accompanied capitalist expansion. The Chinese 'coolies' who built the US railroads from the West Coast (linking up with Irish navvies in Utah) were but one link in a chain that began with the slave trade. That trade, by the most conservative estimate, depleted West Africa of 10 million of its healthiest inhabitants in the course of what was to prove a decisive century in human

development. The abolition of that trade saw the Indian and the Chinese journey to the Caribbean. Then, within the British Empire, colonial administrations developed a clear view on the value of the colonies. In the nineteenth century, Earl Grey commented that in Africa:

"The coloured people are generally looked upon by the whites as an inferior race, whose interests ought to be systematically disregarded when they come into competition with their own, and who ought to be governed mainly with a view to the advantage of the superior race."

He went on to express the view that "the Kaffir population should be made to furnish as large and as cheap a supply of labour as possible". And this 'Kaffir solution' continued into the twentieth century. Within and between continents the migrant worker, has endured as a key – low paid – element in Western economies. In the USA, Mexicans and Puerto Ricans joined black people – descendants of the freed slaves – in the dirty jobs. In Europe, the southern Mediterranean states provided the labour to fuel the boom years of the sixties. In Britain it was slightly different; for Britain had had an Empire which had become a Commonwealth. This, on the one hand, gave British business access to a potentially infinite supply of labour, while on the other made them dependent upon labourers who, as Commonwealth citizens, had gained their own political rights. If they came as migrants they, unlike the Mexicans and Turkish, had the right to stay.

Between 1955 and 1967, two-thirds of a million people from India, Pakistan and the West Indies arrived in Britain. As a wave of immigration it fell into three distinct periods. In the 1950s, West Indian migrants dominated. These – male and female – were in the most part manual workers and mostly skilled. They were, in the words of an official report,

"on the whole . . . successful in their own societies. Only a small number were drawn from the ranks of the unemployed . . . It cost £75 or £85 for a single ticket to the United Kingdom – the equivalent of half a year's wages for unskilled workers; it was therefore likely to be the most enterprising who decided to make the journey."

These enterprising people responded to the demand for labour in Britain. When there were jobs they came to fill them. The pattern of immigration fell in line with the job cycle. In the

1960s things changed. Anticipation of the 1962 Commonwealth Act brought a flood of migrants keen to 'beat the ban'. After the Act itself – and the voucher system it introduced – the focus of migration shifted from the West Indies to the East. It shifted too from manual workers to professional, as Indian and Pakistani teachers, doctors, engineers and scientists took up their "B vouchers" and moved to the UK.

Migration therefore was tied closely to the needs of the British economy, a fact which drove one contributor to an annual conference of the Royal Society to point to its "uncomfortable resemblance to slavery". The new immigrants were "drawn to those regions which, in spite of demand for labour, have not been able to attract much net population from other parts of the country". They went to the towns British people had moved out of. They moved into the "decreasing urban cores of expanding industrial regions", and in towns like Smethwick the Labour Exchanges noted that "coloured labour from the Commonwealth is greatly easing the labour shortage". The attraction of immigrant workers into the West Midlands was a response to a situation where employers experienced a "shortage of labour". One foundry manager reckoned that "white applicants are non-existent for manual work in heavy industry". They were "non-existent" because of the nature of the work and the level of the wages. At that time recruiting officers complained that the likely white applicants would fall into the following types: (i) Previously employed for a period of two to four months and never completed a full week of work. (ii) A long, local history of social security scrounging, coupled with casual employment . . . (iii) A court record usually for metal thefts from places of employment. These were the 'cowboys'; men who, in a period of full employment, moved around from job to job and town to town; men all managers complained about – for their fecklessness and for their effect upon factory discipline. These men didn't care about the boss – or much else either. To these men were added immigrant workers. This sharpened up the competition in the labour market. It also provided the basis for joke after joke: "We're all cowboys and Indians on this shift."

So they came, pulled in by the web of capital's needs. Many of them have now lived in these cities – places like Birmingham, Bristol and London – for over 20 years. They arrived – the West Indians particularly – with high hopes and fond feelings for Britain and the 'English way of life'. Hopes and feelings

which were sadly misplaced, and in which their sons and daughters cannot share. In 1968, a survey conducted by Political and Economic Planning concluded, under a welter of evidence, that:

"In the sectors we studied – different aspects of employment, housing and the provisions of services – there is racial discrimination varying in extent from the massive to the substantial. The experiences of white immigrants, such as Hungarians and Cypriots, compared to black or brown immigrants such as West Indians and Asians, leaves no doubt that the major component in the discrimination is colour."

It went on to make clear that the experience of West Indians had been most severe:

"not only because their expectations were highest, so that they found themselves more often in situations where discrimination can occur, but also because prejudice against 'Negroes' is most deep-rooted and widespread."

The intensity of this experience was born out by a report commissioned by the Runnymede Trust after a West Indian youth had been stabbed in the Handsworth area of Birmingham in 1969. The report pointing to the poverty of the black families in the area – their relatively low wages and poor housing conditions – drew attention to the position of the women:

"To stand on Grove Lane or Rookery Road around 6.30 in the morning and to watch streams of West Indian mothers taking toddlers by the hand into childminding establishments – dingy front rooms in which anything from half a dozen to a dozen children will be herded for the rest of the day, a paraffin oil heater in a corner in the winter – is to observe a very different world from one inhabited by social scientists, teachers and officials."

Quoting a 19-year-old Jamaican man saying, "It's hell to be young in Handsworth. No matter how good you try to be, people still think you're bad." The report concluded that, "It is certainly not dramatic to describe the relationship between police and black men in Handsworth as one of warfare." It predicted that Handsworth:

"a decaying area full of stress and tension . . . is



going to find it increasingly difficult to cope with the root problems because racial animosities and resentments have taken on an independent life of their own."

The extent to which the pessimism of this report can be generalised in the West Midlands is borne out by the view expressed by black workers ten years later. One steel worker, born in Jamaica, saw the situation like this:

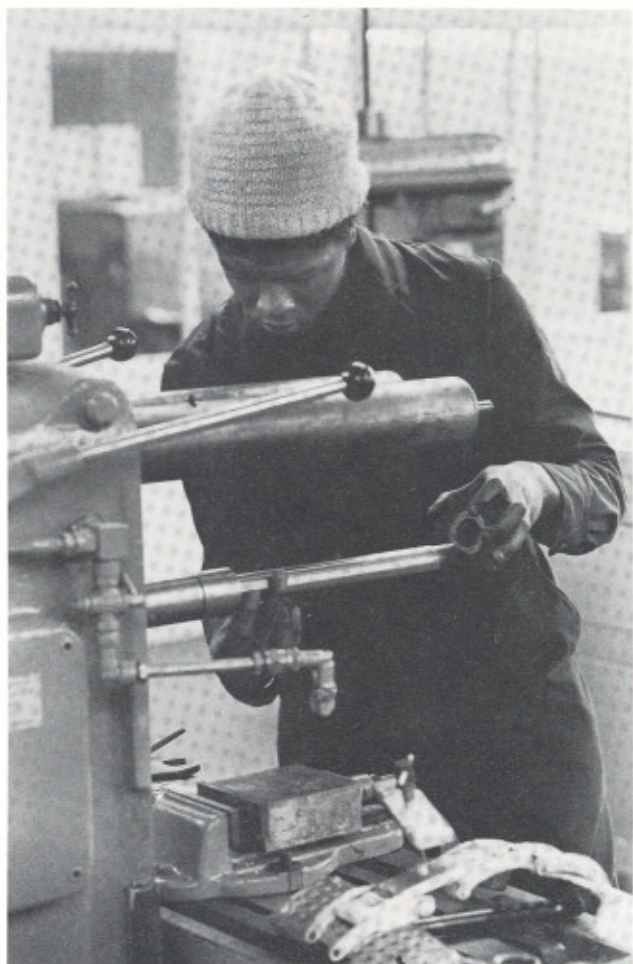
"In Birmingham, and if I die today you remember what I say, there is going to be a terrible race war. The black people in Birmingham are taking a very strong view about the police. Birmingham is like holding a match against a petrol tank, with the police and the black people.

Now many people are against Enoch Powell. I do not accept what he says, but at least he comes out in the open. When you see a snake out there in the sun you can see him, you can watch him, but the snake that hides in the grass, you may step on him, and he may bite you.

The black people in Birmingham are choking to death, because the police are aggravating the young people. They cannot get jobs, they cannot do nothing. If we don't do anything in this country it will be worse than Northern Ireland. There are good policemen in this country – the older ones – but the younger ones who join the force, they will start a race war. The police are the biggest uniformed gangsters in the country. The real trouble is going to start when the immigrant kids leave school, the kids who were born here, when they come out and they don't get their fair share, that's when the trouble is going to start. Up to now the older generation has been holding back their kids – "don't do this, don't do that" – but now it's coming to a situation when instead of holding them back they will support them, because they're right."

Harsh words from a proud and bitter man, words which have a ring of truth about them. Words which have – in the passage of time – been all too clearly vindicated, if not directly in Birmingham (where the West Midlands police force seems to have heeded the earlier warnings), certainly by extension in the events that took place in Bristol and in Brixton.

Borne out too in the report of the Committee of Inquiry into the education of children of ethnic minorities which, in 1981, pointed (amongst other things) to racism, the negative attitudes of teachers and an



inappropriate curriculum as playing a major part in the under-achievement of black youngsters. Harsh words that drive home once again the fact that 'factories' and what happens inside them are established within broader sets of relationships. Men like this man work alongside other white men. They "work together, eat together, talk together". When they're at work they get on well but behind it all there's a worry. The worry that "when they leave here and go home man, when they go in the house, they might talk a different way about me". That's a worry most of all because of the children. When parents talk "the children are sitting there and they hear . . . The first teaching you get, you have to get from the home. If your mother and father don't teach you to like people then you won't. All that you learn at school goes through your ears – it's gone." *That's* the worry. It's a worry about the children; it's a worry about the future. A worry that affects you "as a man with a family". For, while the migrant worker misses his family and worries about them in his absence, he knows that they live on together in a world he *knows*. He expects to return, to reoccupy the position he left, for there to be continuity. In contrast



these people – whose home is here – grieve for their children. For, in a sense, they have lost them.

It affects you in a broader way too. Workers divided outside factories add to divisions within. And here, the parallels with the position of women are strong ones. One man, an immigrant from India in the early sixties and now an active trade unionist put it like this:

"As a trades unionist I think that all the working people should be treated the same. All the whites and blacks they should get together first. Only then can you improve on things. As long as there is a barrier between the working force itself you cannot do much about it. And that involves changing the whole attitude about the immigrant population. That can be done in a good many ways and the media and press play a very large role."

The PEP surveys in the late 1960s were clear on the point that "coloured people were considered by employers, if at all, only when no suitable white English personnel are available". Documenting the extent to which employers (and white workers) operated with

clear stereotypes the report made clear that the immigrants were at the back of the queue for jobs; they took the jobs no one else wanted. They entered at the bottom, and 'promotion' was going to be difficult. In the words of one senior company spokesman:

"I have said we do not discriminate and I stand by that statement. However, there are circumstances when it is impossible to employ a coloured person, despite his qualifications. These circumstances do not apply at all levels but I think it is reasonable to say that the higher the level the greater the pressure and practical considerations that inhibit the employment of coloured people."

National censuses confirmed that the immigrants – like the women – were concentrated in particular jobs, in particular sectors of industry. They were more likely to be required to work shifts, more likely to be in lower paid labouring jobs, more likely to be employed by large companies: 43 per cent of black workers were employed in plants of 500 or more compared with 29 per cent of white workers. In the West Midlands, Indians and West Indians found employment in foundries, on furnaces and rolling mills; together with Pakistanis, they worked in branches of engineering, where many of them – no matter what the level of their skills – were taken on as 'labourers'.

Ten years later, the situation had changed little. The *Financial Times* noted that "few British companies have any type of equal opportunity employment policies for blacks". Making clear that "hardly any British companies have monitored their employees by ethnic origin" and that "few UK managers have plans to change existing patterns of employment" the report pointed a finger at company management.

"Most of them are white and male with no direct experience of the problems of discrimination and they reject blacks who complain as 'troublemakers' . . . As a result, blacks are employed in less skilled jobs than their qualifications would justify, or in 'dead end' posts."

Located in such jobs, myths developed about their 'abilities'; even about how accident-prone they were. It was argued, for example, that a worker, by virtue of being an immigrant, "would be more likely to incur an accident than indigenous workers doing the same job, in the same conditions". A report, *Accidents are*

Colour Blind, was commissioned from Aston University by the Birmingham Community Relations Council to test this. Not surprisingly, the view was found to be baseless. High accident rates amongst immigrants lay in the fact that "immigrant workers are not performing the same tasks as indigenous workers". In the West Midlands they were still "concentrate[d] . . . in some areas and exclude[d] . . . from others". They were "over-represented in industry's more dangerous jobs" from where they "did not appear to be working their way through industry to any great extent".

The pervasiveness of these patterns comes through clearly in this man's account of job selection in the Bilston steel works.

"In this steel works, which is a government place, there is racial discrimination; there's very vigorous racial discrimination in the works. Now the government policy is that there should be no racial discrimination in no part of this country. But in this Bilston steel works, you have more colour bar than in South Africa.

The colour bar operates from the Personnel Office. If you go to some departments here you will see only Englishmen or white men in that job. They've already laid down that policy that if a black man come on that section they'll walk out. Even on the shunting you never see an Indian or Jamaican on that job, and look how many Indians and Jamaicans are on the yard doing the dirty jobs.

Now I have a motor car, I learnt to drive with British Railways, I have a commercial licence; you never see a black man drive a car or lorry for British Steel Corporation. Why? Because that is the transport section and if they take on a black man, those workers tell the management that they will walk out. The department manager should break down that barrier or he should be dismissed. He should say 'whether you like the man or not you work with him. If you do not want to see him you must leave the job.' If you have policy like that things would be better.

We produce the steel and make the furnace work. But have you ever seen a white man come off the back of his engine to help us? He won't take the dirty job. And you never see a black man as an engine driver because that's where the colour bar is. You don't have to ask. Just go into a department where the good jobs are and just tell me if you see a black man doing one. The other unions don't say anything. It's done jointly between the unions and the management. I'll go deeper than that. The



trade unions are only expressing the opinions of these people they're representing. The people here have still got the same old attitude – they do not want the coloured people in their jobs. So the trades unions have got to say to the management that our men don't like it."

As this man – a West Indian – was talking, his union representative – an Indian – concurred. "I'll second that", he nods.



"I don't mind telling you this. The white people here have one thing in common. Whether they are working on the shop floor, whether they are a lawyer, doctor, or a Prime Minister, they have got one thing in mind, and that is to exploit the immigrant as much as they can. They are all united in one thing, that is to get the maximum work out of them and give them the least pay and facilities. They still tend to use that slavery attitude."

"That slavery attitude". A historical legacy that was firmly established in centuries of Empire. A legacy that lies deep in our (white) national psyche. A legacy that was experienced personally and directly by these black people as prejudice.

"There was so much prejudice when we first started to work on this plant, people didn't regard you as an human being, they regarded

you as a fool just born to work and nothing else. But things have changed. We, the immigrant population, are willing to make concessions and we have made concessions as far as our culture is concerned – our way of living; but we are not getting the same response from the English, it's all one sided."

Bad jobs; prejudice and discrimination in a society where their children were born and yet where they 'don't belong'. Pulled half around the world by forces out of their control. It would be easy to see them as victims: the unfortunates, ground under the wheel of capitalist progress. Victims they may be, but it would be wrong to see them as pathetic ones; wrong too to see them as passive observers of their fates. These people, as so many of them have said, so many times, 'are here to stay'. The *Financial Times* (the house journal for thinking members of the British ruling class) understood this clearly ten years ago when its feature article carried the headline, "We live in a multi-racial country."

"Irretrievably? Short of the overthrow of the British constitutional tradition and the installation of an authoritarian regime, the answer must be 'Yes, irretrievably'. The reason is that no British government that respects British law and tradition could honestly legislate for the enforced expulsion from this country of people born here, or people who are British under the law, and are already living here . . . Thus it must be accepted that significant numbers of people of West Indian and Asian origin are here to stay. Once this fundamental fact is established it should not be very difficult to proceed to the next, which is that these newcomers should be treated as equals within the society of which they are now a part. The fact that so many of them are not so treated, which is amply documented in dozens of learned reports, should alarm us, because it is this that could lead to conflict in the future." (3 October 1973)

Conflict that could unbalance those traditions of government in a number of unpredictable ways. Signs of the need for such alarm were well in evidence. In the West Midlands, 'industrial relations' within metal foundries had all but broken down in the late 1960s, and had been the subject of a special inquiry by the Commission of Industrial Relations. In their desire to recruit a malleable and low paid workforce, many foundry managers had actively made use of chains of contacts – between family and friends – that existed

within the Asian community. As one study pointed out, "The networks of kin do not of course stop at Walsall or the West Midlands. Rather they extend back to Kashmir or the Punjab." Such networks, and the processes of patronage that went with self recruitment, carried a "number of weighty advantages in recruitment of Asian workers for the metal trades, advantages which management saw and still enjoy". However, as the journal *Race Today* made clear, such networks could also be used against management. While old men may discipline their sons and nephews, when faced with a grievance, shifts of men united by family ties could prove a formidable obstacle to management plans. The coal owners found this to their cost in the last century. So too the metal employers in the late sixties. The CIR report made it clear that while management's policies had been successful "in terms of numbers" it had had the consequence of;

"transferring to groups of workers the power to determine their own composition, because workers put forward those with whom they had ties within the wider community. The effect of this policy was to create groups which are held together by a powerful set of mutual obligations."

The report noted that the companies had since "changed their recruitment policy, and the selection of new employees is now undertaken directly by the Personnel departments". The reason for this change was a series of united and militant actions by these workers in the face of what they considered to be unfair treatment. The company's response had been the sack – sometimes of the entire labour force. *Race Today* reported how:

"In November 1968, at the Midland Motor Cylinder Co. management attempted to infiltrate a section manned by Asians with a white worker. Asian workers replied that the white worker had been moved over the heads of other Asian workers to join the section and refused to work with him. They went on strike until he was withdrawn. On another occasion management closed down an entire foundry employing 150 Asians. Management claimed 'it was selected for closure in preference to an older foundry because there were labour disputes resulting in a loss of £2 million.' The Asian workforce was to be scattered through five other foundries in the area, on jobs with less pay, and it was planned to re-open the foundry with white workers getting the first option on jobs."



Such events continued. In the May of the following year workers at the Shotton Brothers foundry (a subsidiary of the engineering giant GKN which has massive holdings in the West Midlands metal trade) went on strike for a wage increase. Twenty two of them were sacked. In the same month 80 Asian workers were sacked at another foundry – Newby and Sons Ltd. All for the same offence – of uniting in unofficial strike action against the practices in the foundry. The extent of this conflict points to the importance of the cohesion and comradeship that had been built up within these workplaces. It points too to the way in which an immigrant labour force – with all its vulnerabilities – had established a place for itself; a place to defend. GKN discovered this to its cost in the West Midlands. So too did Ford at Dagenham. There, in the middle seventies, 60 per cent of the company's 23,000 manual workforce was black. As one of them wrote, "We are in the majority at Ford's":

"In the Body Plant we are 70 per cent of the labour force of 6,000 workers. And in the Part, Trim and Assembly plant we are 60 per cent of a labour force of 5,000 workers. The car industry, for the capitalist, is a major source of wealth and power in the international economy... The production of cars at Ford's Dagenham estate brings wealth and power to some 40 other industries whose products are essential to the production of the motor car. It is not only the capitalist who derives power from the car industry. At Dagenham the sole power is not Henry Ford. To be in a majority at such a crucial point in the national economy is not only to have power against Ford management, but also to be powerful in relation to those who govern us."

In the 1970s such majorities in factories *did* exercise power as black workers came together to protect each other and defend their interests. At Ford Dagenham, black workers played a central role in the struggle against the company's use of the layoffs. More generally, and less dramatically, 'immigrant workers' – men and women; sons and daughters – were involved in a variety of struggles, conflicts and confrontations in which their status (low paid, degraded) was a central issue. Sometimes successful, sometimes not; sometimes with the help of white workers. On more than one occasion the struggle has placed these groups on different sides of the fence; sometimes (as at Grunwick) it united them and the trade union movement. Frequently, they have found themselves on

their own against both company and union.

But the struggle continued – and in it women have played an important role. A fact remarkable in itself, but all the more so given the extent to which Asian women were trained in obedience and subservience to men. However in a situation where women and blacks are discriminated against, paid lower wages and generally badly treated, to be black *and* female is to experience a severe compounding of the fates. These women (those from the West Indies particularly) were most likely to be doing two jobs – at home and in the factory. More likely too to be working on assembly lines and in machine-paced operations. More likely to be pushed around. At Imperial Typewriters in Leicester (a subsidiary of the US giant, Litton Industries) 1,100 out of 1,600 workers were Asian. They assembled the typewriter parts that had been made in Germany, Holland and Japan. Every morning they'd arrive at the clock:

"Every morning we come to work at 8 o'clock, we have to stand in a long queue to clock in. I try to come at five to eight because we are paid according to time. Many of us have noticed that white women push past us and clock in first. The foreman at the gate never tells them to stand in the queue."

In the factory they worked at high speed and were paid on a complicated bonus system. On 1 May 1974, after the production line was speeded up and a 'discrepancy' appeared in the bonus agreement, 27 women and 12 men struck. They were joined by 500 others and in spite of sackings the strike continued for three months. In July, the workers returned to the plant. Their initial demands had not been met, but the dismissal notices had been withdrawn. One of the women strikers described how:

"The first day I got back to work, my foreman asked me what I had gained in the last 12 weeks. He was making fun of me I know. But I told him that I had lost a lot of money but I had gained a lot of other things. I told him I had learned how to fight against him for a start. I told him he couldn't push me around any more like a football from one job to another. I told him I knew many things I didn't know before. In the past when I used to get less money in my wage packet I used to start crying at once. I didn't know what else to do. I told the foreman, next time I won't cry, I'll make you cry."



Staying Alive

Work: people and machines together in a factory; black and white, male and female, young and old – all together. *Work*: because it's something you're born to, because you need it to survive, economically and also, in a curious way, as a person – especially if you're a woman and you're married. *Woman's Own* spelt it out in an article on mental breakdown: "If you are housebound and therefore lonely, feeling useless and unworthy, then make a conscious effort to escape the trap of your own four walls."

Work: it can be dangerous, through accidents and occupational diseases it can be a positive danger to health. In steel works, foundries and rolling mills your life is on the line – literally.

"These jobs can be very dangerous. You've got to keep your eyes open. 'Familiarity breeds contempt' they say. We do the job without thinking about it, but a stranger could, within five minutes of walking on the job, get himself killed."

But even here there's the bravado:

"Tap holes, that's the riskiest part, not so risky as it used to be, we've got safety clothes now, when I started we had nothing just an apron and a pair of half sacks, there was no jackets no safety trousers."

And the stories of 'near misses':

"Once, when our kid boy was working on the guides, Lafitch turned round to him and said, 'Don't bother about the hanging guard on the leader, Sam. I'll do them for you.' Then a trial piece came through o.k. And then the next piece comes through. The next thing he knew the bloody bar was wrapping round, curling round him, and he had to jump out of it – nearly jumped into the cabin. Lafitch turned around and said, 'Oh my God, I forgot to put the hanging guards on.' Our Sam ran him all down the bloody mill. If he'd have caught him, he'd have killed him. The bars are like snakes sometimes, whether it's attracted to you I don't know, it follows you."

And even here, "We play about – that's 'unofficial' by the way. We have a laugh and a joke to break the monotony, the boredom."



Can you
celebrate
a
birthday?



HAVE A
BIGGER AND
BETTER
THANK IT OVER

SMILE



FOR YOUR BIRTHDAY



VERY
KIND
TO
THANK
SINCE



**HAPPY
BIRTHDAY
TO
YOU**



Work: it can be painful monotony; more and more this is the case as 'traditional' industries have been rationalised and mass production dominates manufacturing. It's so monotonous that it will wear you down; but with people who will make you laugh. The woman who talked earlier of being a "cabbage feeding a damn monster" was in no doubt about the tedium involved in her job yet, nearing the end of her 'working life', she:

"won't be pleased to finish. I shall miss the comradeship and the company. It's a good team here – we need to be. The girls have to be very skilful and very quick. At the end of the day you feel physically drained when you go home."

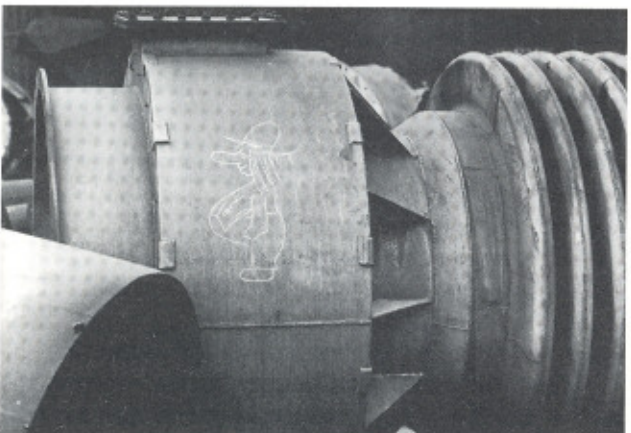
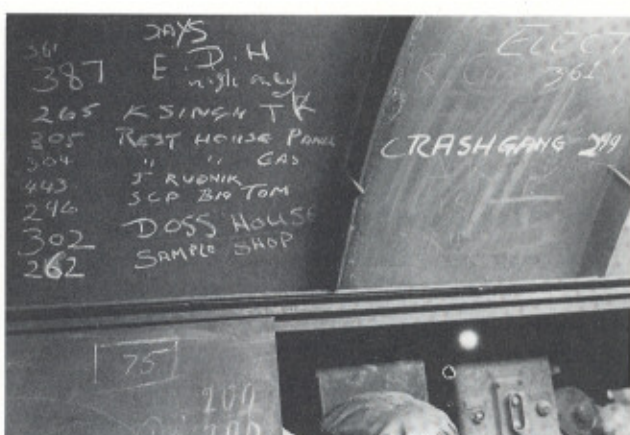
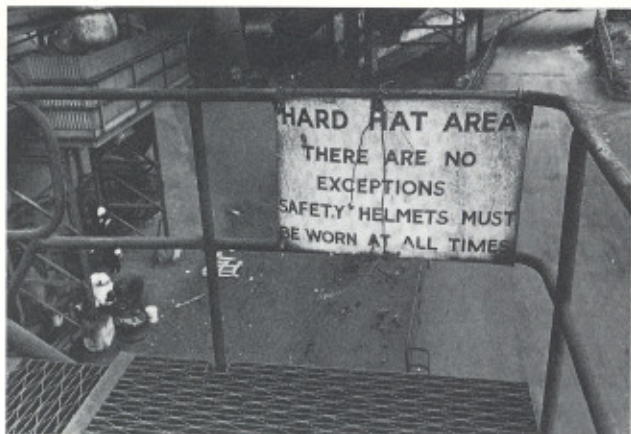
Work: something that *you* do, something that you *know* about, something about which you have a point of view. A public part of you that you can react with. This same woman gets really annoyed because:

"everybody seems to run working people down. And when I say working people I include management because they're working people as far as I'm concerned. Everybody who is involved in the production of materials is a worker to my mind. That's one reason why I feel so strongly about the media. The mass media have an awful lot to answer for. They represent us badly; we're layabouts to them. The truth is that they're never inside to find out. We are small people – we have no means of getting over to newspapers. I'd like to spend a week on a newspaper to put it across to people. They do impugn the honour of working people."

Working people: people who work for a living, people who 'earn their money'; realistic people who know that "if you ain't going to come here you've got to go somewhere else"; who know too that life is hard, that you might "strike lucky" but that few people hand out any favours. All in all "you need a laugh and a joke now and then", you need to "take things as they come". You know there's no future in "eyes down from hooter till hooter"; you know too that the people around you can make a hell of a difference to the job.

"When I left school I was a sugar boiler in a sweet factory. When I got married I had to leave, I couldn't afford to stop there then. I came here then and I've been here ever since. We was always happy, we always had a good time, but it's always hard, it's never been easy. It's something you get used to and once you







get into it, it seems to come natural. We've always had a decent bunch of chaps to work with, never had arguments or anything. If you aren't happy, your job's twice as hard. If you're happy in your work and you've got a decent bunch of lads around you who can have a laugh and a joke, it's the biggest part of working. The hardest part of the job is just being happy. I've been lucky in both jobs I've had, I've always had a decent bunch of chaps."

Workplaces: full of signs and instructions; noticeboards and rules; where you must or musn't be; what you must or mustn't do; things to catch your eye. Things equally to ignore or deface; to obey if you have to or if you feel like it. For if work in our society is about violence, about pressure and exploitation, it is also about resistance; occasionally about refusal, about confrontation and victory. Most often it is about survival; about getting through the day or night; about staying alive.

In some work places – particularly in old steel works, and engineering workshops – men have, over a century or more, built up some space for themselves around the flames and the cutting of metal. The pattern of the work process – the teeming of open hearth

furnaces every six hours or so – gave them the time, and their knowledge of that process provided the space. Many of the men who worked in places like British Steel Corporation's plant at Bilston had worked there all their lives. While they will talk with you for hours about the hardships of work and about the struggles with the old bosses, you are left in no doubt that many of them have been at home in their work. The plant itself was warren'd with 'cabins': small rooms where work crews sit and talk, make tea, eat pies and sandwiches, play cards and read newspapers; rooms with shelves – filled with sauce bottles, sugar and tea, biscuit tins, postcards, snapshots and posters. A collection.

People use the space in their lives in different ways. Some waste it wilfully, almost gladly. Others cherish the bit they have, garner it almost, protect it jealously. So it is in factories. For one man, an immigrant too but with a white skin and from an earlier time, his time at work is cherished. Chest, boots, teapot, geraniums – they surround him providing an image of order and simplicity. Another man paints. He paints portraits of Presley, and displays them, almost provocatively. They're *his* and they define his space.



In places like these work was graft and it was a danger but it was also a way of life. They'd all tell you that. They *lived* at work. Some of them even talked about loving it.

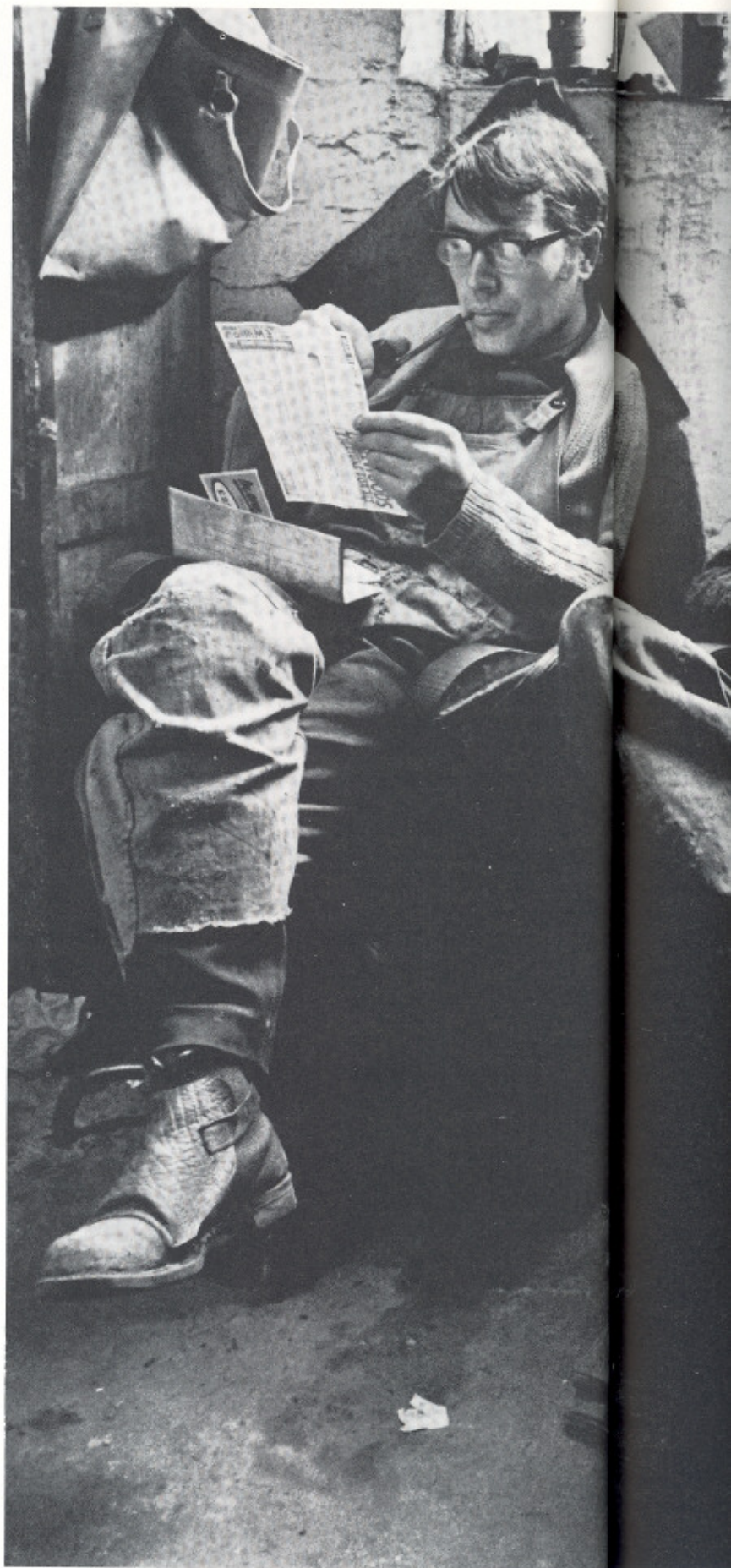
"I love coming to work, last year I had to go into hospital for a hernia operation. I was away from work for three months. It was the most boring three months I've ever had. I used to come down here twice a week just to see my mates, I was really glad to come back, they're great here, I really enjoy coming here. My wife will tell you that. I mention nothing else but the steel works. Oh I'd never leave here, they're a great set of blokes really."

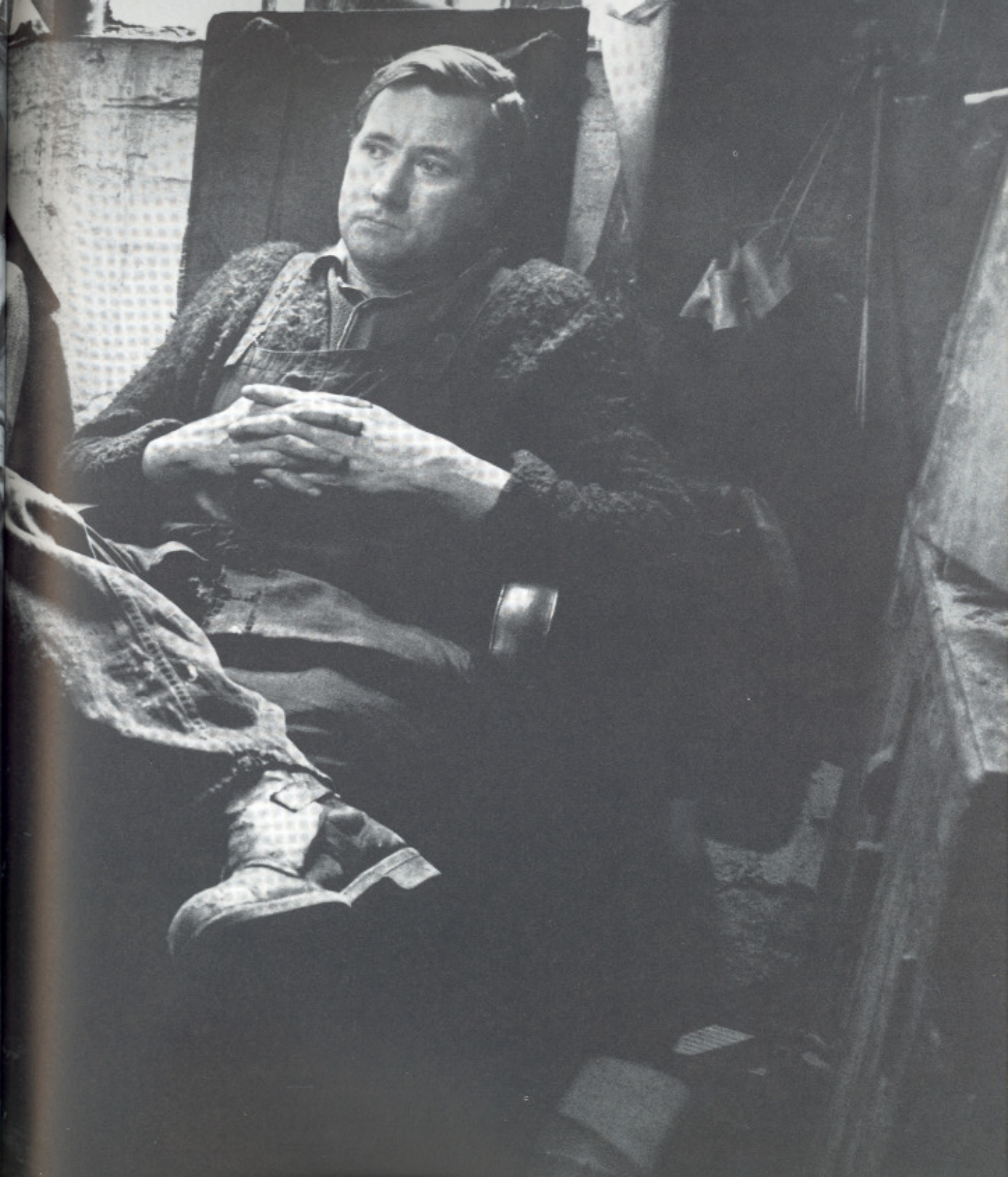
The fumes get in your lungs, the weight of the shovel can wear you down; the shifts too, changing your eating and sleeping rhythms every other day as you fit the steel and the furnace around the rest of your life. But you can grow to like it. Like it to the point that it became natural; it became you; it said something about you.

"I prefer shift work to day work, I suppose it's because I've done it for so long. But I think that Monday-to-Friday is a rut. I see people, even my next door neighbour, doing the same thing every week year after year; washing the car down on a Sunday – always the same thing."

Being different not being the same thing day in day out, it was something that stood out more and more clearly in a world where 'monotony' and 'sameness' were becoming the rule. Being different, yet established and stable, it was something which brought those people together.

"It's a funny sort of industry. We don't have rows or anything like that; you never see any upsets. I dare say we have had more reason to go on strike than anyone – the conditions we work in – but it's never come into it. You work five blokes to a furnace, and you help each other. And it's o.k. if you've got a happy crew. I'm not being big-headed but our crew is the best on the plant. Everybody will do everybody's work. When I got burnt, I was stuck here for a week before I went on the box. Everybody come to me and said, 'don't go on the box Bill, we'll do that'. They were doing their own and doing mine. And it works between the crews as well. If they're in trouble on 'G' furnace, 'H' will come and help out; if they're in trouble on 'H' furnace 'G' will help out. It's like a family."







A family of men. If the places in these photographs have a dilapidated look about them, it's not surprising. They are extremely old. The buildings themselves were built in the last century. People say the same thing about the equipment at times. In the early 1960s when visitors from the German steel industry made regular visits to British steel plants, workers often got the impression that "they're laughing at us behind our backs – when they see the sort of stuff we're using here". While the German steel industry refitted itself after the war, plants in Britain continued much as before. In doing so, they relied heavily upon the traditions and skills of its workforces: traditions that pushed people into "finding a way", that stressed a dedication to the task of producing steel.

"There's a sense of continuity if you like, a sense of dedication. You find this on most of the steel works except for the newer ones, you've got fathers and grandfathers and sons, it gives a sense of continuity and a sense of pride. I can't imagine such a sense of pride being born out of the Post Office or Woolworth's. At the last works we used to regularly have the pensioners back for a night or dance and this is the tragedy of what's

happening now, people who work here tend to associate it with something that's permanent, it will be there for their sons and their sons' sons, and so it's worth putting something into it, making it that bit better or at least keeping it as good as it is. But when there is talk of closures you find the sons take apprenticeships with other works or GKN and you lose that sense of craftsmanship and continuity and it is a fight to keep it going, it is a fight. There is still a large reliance placed on individual capability."

Father to son: that was what working in the steel industry was all about. Someone to 'have a word' for you, to show you around when you start, to 'keep an eye out' for you; someone too to 'put you on the right road', to hand something on to in times when everyone needs what help they can get. Someone else too, who stayed at home and cooked the meals for you, adjusting her domestic routines to the vicissitudes of shift work. For in steel, the sexual division of labour operated in its most extreme form; in both 'work' and 'community'. It was the same on the docks and in the pits. In parts of the engineering industry too. Industries that were at the very heart of an



enduring working-class culture built around men at work.

"My dad worked here, I've got two uncles who worked here, my brother works here. It probably helps. You think that there is someone working there who you know, they'll show you the ropes. And I'm glad I started here. When I see a motor car I think 'I've taken part in that.' And in the steel process things come back 20 years later and you melt them down again to make more steel. It's a real thing.

I've got two kids and I should leave it entirely up to them. I was never forced to do what I turned out doing. I could have gone into an office. I had a grammar school education; I could have done anything really. I could have stopped at school, but I didn't want to. And children have got their own minds today, too. They are nearly 17 when they leave school today. My lad has been here, I brought him in 12 months ago. He's seen what it's like. If it is still here in another ten years time, I shall bring him round and say: 'Do you think that you would want to come somewhere like this?' In ten years time he will probably see the results of my 20-odd years here; he will see the result in me, and he'll think: 'I ain't going to do that.' In another ten years time it's got to show."

The irony here is deep and verges upon pathos. Your job is all you have. You're glad you've done it because it's what you are. You'd welcome your son in but you won't push him. It's doing *you* no good you can tell, and you know that, ultimately, it will do him no good either. But it's a job. It's a job you worry about: "Today I think that everybody has got the feeling, with only three furnaces on, that the plant is slowly closing down. It's a gradual run down. You got blokes saying 'another two years and we're finished'. This has gone on since I started here, but there is more chance of it now than there was 15 or 16 year ago. I think that definitely it's ready for the hammer now. To me it doesn't make sense. Why import millions of tons of steel when there are plants here probably capable of producing it cheaper? I think it's political. Do they want a steel industry in this country? If the car industry is finished, which it has a chance of being, the steel industry is finished too - 90 per cent of it is."

In 1979 the Bilston steel works closed: after 200 years, steel-making came to an end in the town. The 16,000-ton blast furnace 'Elizabeth' was blown up, collapsed, and cut into scrap ingots.



We live in a sexually segregated society. At work, in factories and offices, men and women are separated from each other to a remarkable extent. A study of the employment of women reported in 1980 that 45 per cent of women and 75 per cent of men work in jobs that are totally segregated. In heavy engineering, for example, the dominance of men is almost complete. So much is this the case that in Britain only one in 500 professional engineers are women. (In the USA the proportion is 1:100; in Scandinavia 1:50, in USSR 1:3.) In steel production too. Bilston, as we have seen, was a place where the men – day and night, 8, 12, 16 hours at a time – made steel. In these places men, away from work, have traditionally had their meals prepared for them by women, and spent a great deal of their leisure time with their workmates. Many Working Men's Clubs, still retain "men only" restrictions in their bars. In Britain, across a century and more, notions of manhood (expressed through the idea of making provision for a wife and family) have interlaced with those of masculinity and sexuality.

In 1930, for example, a leading member of the General and Municipal Workers' Union argued in opposition to the introduction of family allowances in this way:

"Let the men in industry take the mantle of manhood and come into the unions and fight to establish a standard of comfort that will enable them to make provision [for their families]."

The place of women in the home was established as part of a *moral* order. It was one which imprinted manliness upon 'real work', and which made the wages of men a 'family wage'. Moreover through the family, the universe of women became divided into those who were under the protection of men and those who, as 'fair game', were there to be preyed upon. (It was, in 1982, in connection with a case of rape that the Conservative Secretary of State for Scotland talked of sexual relations in terms of "the hunter and the hunted".) In ways such as these male promiscuity has come to be seen as normal and part of nature, in contrast to a dual image of the female as 'mother' and 'whore'. The least that can be said of this strange asymmetry (apart from its implicit unfairness) is that it provides little basis for understanding between men and women.

The issues here are subtle and profound ones (imagine, for example, Burt Reynolds and not John Inman in the role of secretary in the TV comedy set in the office of a female executive). They express themselves in their most banal form in the images of women which litter the walls and notice boards of factories. In the Bilston steel works for example, the official "No Entry" sign depicted a naked open-legged woman; her hand preventing the 'entry' of a miniature (phallic) oil tanker. This official pornography is reinforced on business calendars, as a whole range of industrial hardware (from pumps to tyres and monkey



wrenches) advertises itself through the female form. Here, and on centrefolds, in offices and on the factory floor the colours catch your eye, immediately contrasting with the dominant drabness. Women: naked, prostrate, passive.

"You walk into the plant and the first thing that strikes you... are the displays of Playboy-type nudes in every available space. Like being wrapped up in the *Sun*. The naked woman becomes the symbol, however distorted and distorting, of 'real' life outside the factory."

As one young man wrote of life in a Citroen assembly plant.

"Porn magazines amongst the metallic dust and the filthy grey overalls: a painful impression. Prisoners' fantasies."

The pain here is a deep one; wounding at many levels. Often the fantasies bear little relation to 'life'. Often too (and this is much more damaging) they become transposed onto life, dominating it and sexuality.

For example in the film *The Working Class Goes to Paradise*, Massa – a super-productive worker, earning high rates of bonus – explains to a couple of new workers how he dominates the machine and overcomes the boredom: "You've got to pick out something that will hold your concentration. Me, I concentrate on Adalgisa's ass over there." Adalgisa is a clerical worker who carries errands on to the

factory floor, watched by Massa working on piece rates: "a piece... an ass... a piece... an ass...".

In ways like this, the rhythms of the machine – driving, enduring, persistent – are imposed upon the world of sexuality and sexual relations. The masculine sexual boast is a boast about output: how many, how often, how long... It is a boast which eschews ideas of tenderness and care. It is an expression of a mechanical sexuality, and one which, at best, leaves women less than satisfied; at worst, the consequence for women is fear and humiliation. More and more it is the case that the women who share workplaces with men (mostly as subordinates, often in a minority) complain of sexual harassment. Complain too of the pornography which contrasts so graphically with *their* lives and their understandings of themselves.

"Some of the girls don't like it; they get upset about it in fact. I've just learned to ignore it. To me it's just stupid. But sometimes I do think: what would the men think about working in a place, run by women and with lots of photographs of naked men on the walls. They laugh about it, but they wouldn't like it."

It can be said for those all-too-rare workplaces where men and women *do* meet in numbers and on some kind of equal basis that there at least, male and female confront each other in reality. Perhaps learning from each other and about themselves.









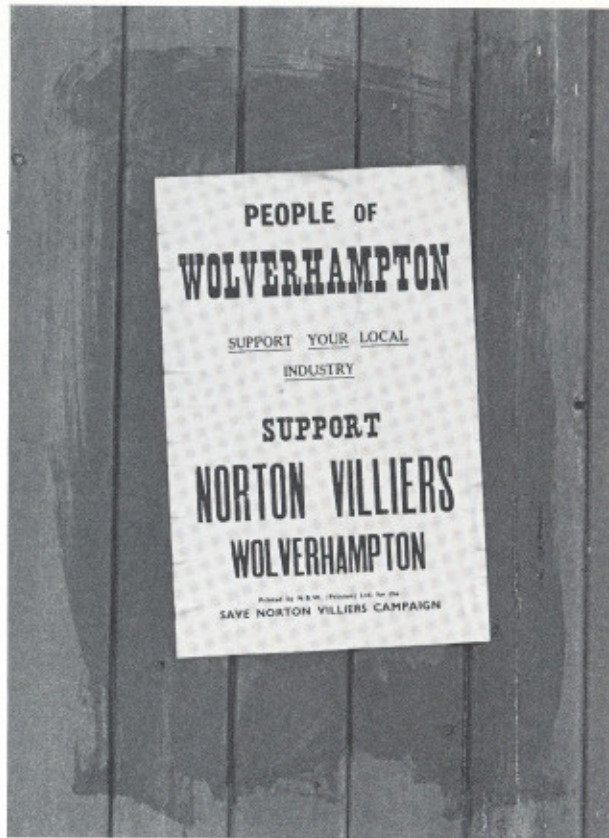
Work then, in spite of Henry Ford, is about a lot more than numbers. Production can be measured, timed, even counted accurately, but to count the end product – ‘x tons’ or ‘y units’ – and to ignore (or forget) the human activity that went into it is to commit the gravest error. ‘Labour’ is at the heart of production, and while it might suit the logic of accountancy and big business to represent ‘labour’ in numerical form (variable costs, natural wastage, output per *man*) that form can never serve as a true, even adequate, equivalent of the human energy and potential (the ideas, traditions and feelings) that is bound up in human labour. To present things numerically is to run the risk of forgetting that ‘labour forces’ differ from each other; to forget that what comes out at the end – in labour – is the consequence of a complicated process of people giving themselves (or not giving themselves) over to the demands of capital and the machine. The fact, for example, that the ‘three day week’ under the Heath government led – in some branches of manufacturing – to just the slightest of drops in output is referred to repeatedly in board rooms and financial columns. The conclusion is inescapable: ‘people can work harder; they can do it if they want to’. The fact that they can but that they don’t want to, has been a problem for capital in Britain. For us, the fact that they won’t and that they do resist says a lot about factory life generally. For, much as the language of

‘rationality’ is applied to the organisation of production, workers – in their actions – insist that there is more to work than working. In spite of the most elaborate excesses of modern production techniques – the assembly line, stop watch, work study – people still find time for a laugh and a joke, they still struggle to make a bit of space for themselves. People bet in factories, buy some of their shopping there, they exchange clothes and furniture, swap magazines; they make things for themselves or for their friends, some people – skilled men mostly, but others also, and to a surprising degree – have ‘foreigners’ (private jobs done in company time) off to a fine art and make them to order. In factories, people have been known to fall in love and to have affairs. In doing all this they give substance to a slogan painted inside a factory in the USA:

Life without work is guilt.
Work without art is barbarity.

Freed from guilt, people “born to work” give something of themselves to others in factories. There, ‘working for the man’, they earn wages, they ‘keep the wolf from the door’; they also learn something about who they are. By being there, they – men and women of different ages, with different coloured skins – affect each other. They make something more of each other. Sometimes even, they obtain happiness.





Work in the Future

"People in the West Midlands are still shell-shocked by the events of the past 12 months – the extent of redundancies and closures." This was how John Warburton, the director of Birmingham's Chamber of Commerce, described the situation in 1981. The region, long regarded as the prosperous centre of British industrial development, was then and still is today in a state of shock, with a record 14.8 per cent of its work force unemployed. The gloom was echoed by Chris Walliker, the chairman of the Regional Council: "Even if the recession has levelled off – and I'm not sure that it has – orders are at rock bottom.

At present levels of demand further unemployment is inevitable, not just in manufacturing but across the board." And across the board the Midlands had, throughout 1980 and 1981, lost jobs at the rate of 1,000 a week: 40,000 in the motor industry alone. A loss of jobs through closure and redundancy as the manufacturing core of the West Midland's economy virtually collapsed.

GKN, the giant Midlands engineering company, alone shed 18,000 jobs in 1980. Component factories, screw factories, forges and foundries – they all closed down. By the

end of 1981 the company's Heath Street site in Birmingham had seen its labour force cut from over 2,000 to 965 – all in the space of 18 months. At GKN Sankey too. Its major Telford plant shed 1,000 workers in 1980, and another 1,000 in 1981. The manager of the Telford Development Corporation, shaken by an unemployment rate of 18 percent commented: "After last week's announcement by GKN we all lay awake and wondered what the hell to do next." In the eight years between 1973 and 1981 the jobs in GKN were reduced by 35 percent, almost matching BL where the figure was 40 percent and BSC, 52 percent. Metal manufacture is closing down, and with it, the Midland's economy. In its own report on the region in 1981 the Manpower Services Commission claimed that "The main indications on redundancies, engagements and vacancies suggest a further worsening of the situation in the months ahead." In what it considered an "unprecedented" situation, it suggested that in the 1980s the young, the unskilled, the disabled and ethnic minorities were particularly vulnerable to the threat of unemployment and in the face of this a union official commented:



“There can hardly be a worker who does not have a neighbour or a friend out of work or on short-time. Against this background he will be grateful for a job and agree to flexibility in work practices that would previously have been unacceptable.” (*The Times*, 31 January 1981)

Employed and unemployed, in work and out of work; the squeeze is on.

It is a chastening thought, looking back through the pages of this book, that the people who talked of danger, of stress and monotony, of conflict and tension were talking during times that were relatively good. Most of these people – whose faces stand out of the pages you flick through – are now unemployed. *Out* of work. The unemployment rate in Bilston today is over 20 percent. For the others – those who have not been sacked, the ‘fortunate ones’ – they are used to serve as a reminder of the consequences of ‘bad behaviour’. As another union official put it:

“The recession has polarised workers – into those with a job and those without. Those in work won’t abuse their position for fear of the

employment consequences.” (*Financial Times*, 10 September 1981)

So now is the time for quiescence. Acceptance of your lot. No more moaning about pay and conditions. Just get on with the job and be thankful you’re in work. Because if you don’t the factory will close and it will be *your fault*.

Nineteen seventy three was a crunch year for the British motor cycle industry. It put the writing clearly on the wall for the Midlands too. British motor cycles once dominated world markets, and factories in Britain turned out more bikes than those in any other country. Triumph, BSA, Norton Villiers, these were the names that dominated TT races and the world’s sale rooms. By 1973 they were all part of one company: Manganese Bronze Holdings (MBH), a company which, in the words of John Pilger, had,

“In the great tradition of British management... bought out small concerns, closed them down and invested abroad.” (*Daily Mirror*, 2 December 1976).

Manganese Bronze, held Norton Villiers as a

subsidiary. In 1973 it had arranged a merger between Norton Villiers and Triumph, buying up the whole of the BSA Company. Aided by the Department of Industry, MBH and its tycoon owner Dennis Poore aimed at establishing a single viable motor cycle company: Norton Villiers Triumph. In the view of a local TGWU official however, "Mr Poore had to take Triumph to get his hands on the more viable part of the BSA group." There were no long-term plans. And so it proved. The closure of Triumph's Meriden factory was announced three months later. Two years later a similar notice to quit was given to Norton

Villiers workers at Wolverhampton. As the *Guardian* put it:

"Norton Wolverhampton closed down in the wake of the virtual collapse of the British motor cycle industry in the shape of Norton Villiers Triumph. The Triumph part of the operation has since become the Meriden cooperative at Coventry . . . Unlike their Triumph colleagues, the Villiers men, who have conducted a sit-in at the plant since it closed, never planned to become their own bosses. They just felt they had the ability to become a viable concern in their own right if they could find some finance to



restart their business separately from the other group. They had a wide range of light industrial engines which sold steadily, designs for new motor cycle engines which were accepted by the industry to be potential world beaters, and above all the historical commitment to their jobs which is found in many Midlands engineering factories."

One man who had expressed his commitment while working at the plant for 23 years described how they put up with the conditions, with the noise and the dirt and with the knowledge that he and his mates were working

with inferior equipment for relatively low wages. It was, he said,

"because of the pride we had in what we produced. Yes it was simply *pride* . . . When I read in the papers how workers in America and Germany turn out more than we do, I want to shout 'but do they have to work with antiques?'"

A pride and commitment that sat it out, patiently but with no little anger, hoping for a solution that would make sense. A pride and a commitment that ended in the dole queue.







The motor cycle industry is just one example. Alongside it went the decline of the (equally vulnerable) motor car industry, as BL ran down its operations throughout the region: an accelerating spiral of closure and industrial decline. The context of this decline is a growing internationalisation of capital and company structures. As BL proves its vulnerability in the face of the giant multinational car producers so British component manufacturers re-order their operations. In this way "shake out" and "run down" in the English Midlands is matched by grant-assisted development elsewhere. Commenting on this new "flexibility" and "competitiveness" of British firms the *Sunday Times* remarked:

"It is something they have achieved by planning on an international base. As car production has migrated away from the U.K., they have moved with it, to America or Europe, taking the jobs with them. 'We've grown out of the West Midlands,' says one executive, 'anyone tied to the fortunes of the local motor industry is now suffering too much.'"

So the companies expand, reorganise themselves, and profit. The suffering remains though. It remains in towns like Telford and Bilston; in Hull and Leicester too where Litton Industries, smarting from the new assertiveness of its workforce, closed down Imperial Typewriters. At Leicester the management called a meeting of the entire workforce to tell them the news. One member of the action committee, an Asian woman, described how:

"A week earlier management told us that they were going to stop making electrical typewriters but they would take most of us into the section that produces the Model 80 manual typewriters. So there were rumours going around that there might be some redundancies. Then on Friday we were called at 3.30 in the afternoon. Bob Kirk, one of the managers who addressed the meeting, said they had decided to close the factory down because they are losing money. We were all shocked – nobody expected it. He told us he didn't want any questions from us and that we could all go home early. He said if we had any questions we should ask our shop stewards on Monday. The meeting lasted only for about five minutes – and then we were told to go home. There was no time to discuss anything.

Many of us will find it difficult to get another job in Leicester. I think many people will have

to move to other cities. Nobody here wants to employ Imperial Typewriter workers – especially those of us who went on strike.

At the meeting the first response, particularly from the women and the younger workers was, 'so what, close the place down'. But it's really not that simple. We have to think of what's going to happen next. How we're going to live? Of course I'm worried about losing the job – who knows where I'll get another? It would be wrong to say it is an Asian problem; we're not the only people affected. Some white men at the factory have been there for 30 years. Many of them will find it difficult to get another job at their age. And without much education and no other qualifications (some of them have never even seen London) how will they manage? I was talking to an elderly white man the other day. He said 'Why are you worried? You're young and I'm sure you'll find another job. But who will employ an old man like me?'

I care that the factory is closing down – I have to. Apart from the children there are four of us living in this house – my sister-in-law does the housework so she doesn't earn any money, and the rest of us try somehow to pay the monthly mortgage. Once I'm out of a job things are going to become impossible. As a single woman with three children I would get only £19.50 from Social Security. Many of the married women at the factory only pay half-stamps so they won't get anything at all. At least all the men will get the full unemployment benefit. I pay the full stamp because I'm a widow, but not many others do. So the women will be worse off in a way. The younger people on the other hand are less worried. Not many of them have found other jobs yet, but they don't worry too much. They say, 'something will turn up'. There are whole families working at the factory – in some cases five people from the same family work at Imperial's, and financially they are going to lose a lot."

In an attempt to fight the closure, workers in Hull set up an Action Committee whose "Social Audit" pointed to the fact that:

"Litton Industries – a major U.S. multi-national company with world sales of £1000 million in 1973 . . . took over Imperial Typewriters, an old established British company, in 1966. During the same period it expanded its ownership of typewriter manufacturing throughout the world, including plants in Germany and Japan. Typewriters were seen as one of its major growth sectors . . . By whatever means, Litton acquired control of thirty per cent of world



typewriter production . . . It is (now) reported that Litton propose to cater for that part of the English market now supplied with Imperial typewriters from a German subsidiary. If Imperial is allowed to close, some four-fifths of the entire market for office machines in the U.K. will have to be met from imports."

Imperial closed. Across a whole range of manufacturing industry – from machine tools to textiles and clothing – the story has been the same. In the face of this collapse, the CBI and others have pointed, with optimism, to a future based upon the 'sunshine industries' linked into the microelectronic revolution. British industry, having lagged behind in this area too, is now held to be in a good situation to develop and exploit these new technologies. Whatever the likelihood of this, working people cannot view such a future with equanimity. Where the new techniques have been introduced into British factories, the effect – upon the kind of work people do – has been something less than a liberating experience. Skilled engineering workers, while recognising that "in a capitalist society . . . you have to have the equipment if you're going to compete", point to the effect of computerised processes upon the skill content of their jobs: 'it definitely takes the skills out of that job'."

A clear example of the way in which the new technology can go hand in hand with the creation of new, and even more routinised jobs, was provided by the Philips Company in 1981. In developing its new video-disc production system, the company experienced technical difficulties at the testing stage. The problem was solved in its Blackburn factory where:

"a dozen women . . . stare at television screens all day . . . Philips is to go on to three shift working to speed up testing of the discs which play for an hour. Each woman sits in front of four television screens." (*Financial Times*, 18 September 1981)

In one of the few investigations of the effects of working in such situations, the Leeds Trade Union and Community Resource and Information centre provided this account of working on Visual Display Units.

"One worker, who has been using VDUs intermittently for three-and-a-half years, and continuously (seven-and-a-half hours a day) for the last six months, described the effects: 'When you get home you feel tired and tense and irritable. All the girls here complain about headaches and waking up in the morning with

puffy eyes. Sometimes when you're working you get very dizzy and feel you have to have a break. A friend of mine went to get her eyes tested because the headaches were getting so bad. The optician said she had long vision so it's very bad for her to be working so near the screen (it's 18 inches away). He said she'd have to wear glasses if she went on working under these conditions. He'd been getting people in practically every day with problems from working with VDUs.

A worker at a mail-order warehouse in Bradford said that she'd been suffering from complete 'blackouts' since VDUs had been introduced at her workplace. She saw three different doctors before one suggested that it was the VDUs causing it.

A telling description of every day effects of working with VDUs comes from a worker for ASDA supermarkets, who does not himself work with them. He said, 'The VDU operators are always round the coffee machine during their breaks. They seem to need nine or ten cups a day; the rest of us will only have two or three at the most - it's not exactly what you'd call a nice cup of coffee.'

These jobs all affect women and they are mostly located in the 'service sector'. It was in this sector that workers, made redundant as manufacturing closed down, were expected to find new jobs: in offices, shops, transport and so on. This was the key to the 'post-industrial society'. Throughout the 1970s the run-down of jobs in manufacturing industry was balanced by an increase in 'non-industrial' jobs. Over the past two years, however, there has been a change. The jobs expansion turned into a retreat, the 'service sector' too entered decline as a provider of jobs. There is little doubt that the new technology has played a part in this. In banking, insurance, local government and the retail trade, computerised systems are predicted to have a catastrophic effect (15 per cent unemployed by 1991) upon job prospects. The head of the Science Policy Research Unit at the University of Sussex took a balanced view when he wrote in 1978 of the "large scale displacement of secretaries, filing clerks, typists and paper-work generally."

"Much of this sounds like science fiction, but I think we have to take it seriously. . . . We have a stark dilemma facing us. If we do not keep up with the international race in the use of microprocessor technology, then we risk becoming even more uncompetitive in terms of world trade, so that even before North Sea oil expires, the problem of growth and levels of



employment in the British economy would be even more severe than it is today. If we adopt the revolution enthusiastically in every branch of our economy then we also risk accelerating the scale of labour displacement."

A gloomy prospect then, and one which seems all the more poignant as unemployment figures pass the three million mark.

In the West Midlands, like the north and 'the Celtic fringe' (as Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are referred to) unemployment rates have soared; and there is no sign of them coming down. None of the economic projections consider the possibility of unemployment falling below an officially recorded figure of three million for the next two years, while some anticipate a rise as high as five million by 1984. As *The Times* put it: "it begins to look as if the years of virtually full employment . . . were an aberration rather than a new dawn." In the countries of the EEC 13 million people were registered out of work while the total for the capitalist West verges on 30 million.

And even these figures underestimate the extent of the problem. In 1981 there were 33.4 million people between the ages of 16 and 65 living in Britain; 23.7 million of these were in



employment, three million were registered as unemployed. Of the remaining five-and-a-half million people, some – married women with young children for the most part – had no desire for a job. For others, this was not the case. Older people, pressured by the increasing demands of the factory, were forced into early retirement. Three quarters of these were in ill health or handicapped in some way; most of them were badly off, claiming sickness and invalidity benefits. Old men pensioned off into poverty and – by all statistical accounts – an early death. These people don't appear on the unemployment lists. Nor do many married women. And this isn't because these women 'don't bother to register'. In fact the opposite is true as increasing numbers become entitled to unemployment benefit. If we want the reasons why married women come off the register we need look no further than the 'job market'. As *The Times* pointed out:

"It is because they are discouraged by poor job prospects that many women have given up looking for work altogether and this at a time when pressure on family incomes from unemployment, short-time working and loss of overtime might be expected to motivate more

women to look for work." (26 November 1980) Another part of the statistical fallacy is found in the number of young men and women – 360,000 of them – who have been foisted on to 'government schemes': the YOPs and the WEEPs. Paid no more than a pittance on jobs whose relationship to 'training' is little more than a masquerade, these youngsters are not registered as a part of the three million. But their experience (like that of many women and retired grandparents) belies this. At home or on a YOP scheme the feeling is the same: "I cannot get a proper job."

Unemployment affects everyone: though it's the weak who suffer most – the young, the old and the sick; black people and women. If you have a vulnerability this system will find it. Take the *young*. Over half the unemployed total fall between the ages of 16 and 24. And school leavers are particularly badly affected. 14,500 left school in Coventry in 1979 and 1980 – only 7,000 of them found a job. The remaining 7,500 competed for 658 vacancies registered in the city – just a third of which were deemed "suitable for school leavers". For them YOP was the answer. And for many, the answer was a poor one. Youthaid, in its assessment of these schemes – *Quality or Collapse* – reported the view that:

"The objective of YOP was to 'increase the competitive edge' of young people and get them as quickly as possible into a job. It was argued that so long as the programme was contained by this objective its quality would be necessarily limited. Many of the jobs available to young people required no skill or training. If YOP began to offer high quality training to all, it would become more attractive than many jobs and thus breach its original terms of reference."

In the meantime the number of apprenticeships falls dramatically. In the engineering industry – where the 'shortage of skill' has been noted most often by migrating employers – the intake of craft and technical apprenticeships in 1981 was the lowest ever recorded.

"Companies have taken on fewer than 12,000 apprentices and although a further 4,000 places are being funded through the Engineering Industry Training Board, it is estimated that there should have been 20,000 new apprenticeships this year to meet the industry's future requirements." (*Financial Times*, 2 November 1981)

In the printing industry, the Joint Apprenticeship Board noted that, unless the trend was reversed, there would be "a serious effect on the ability of some colleges to maintain printing courses for apprentices". In construction too where, in 1981, the number of apprenticeships fell by 1,247 to 6,283. Little wonder that one young woman should comment:

"I quite fancy being a plumber or a builder or something like that. But when I think of the number of men around who can't get jobs in those trades, I get disheartened."

While 'unemployment' is always represented statistically – in percentages and in long lists of numbers – it has a quality which those numbers can never catch. 'Unemployment' is about experience and it's about power. As the numbers go up, so do people's lives alter. And they alter in many ways.

"You walk into a room and don't have any way into the conversation. If you've got a job, even if it is disgusting you can make people laugh by telling them how horrible it is. But if someone asks you what you do and you have to say 'I'm unemployed,' that's it. End of conversation. They just say 'I'm sorry.'"

For this person – a woman – unemployment was a deeply wounding experience. For this man too:

"When you have no work, the day... the week... seems to lose meaning. It is more difficult to rouse yourself to do anything when you have all the time in the world on your hands."

For women, however, that time becomes all too easily filled.

"I can't stand staying in bed. I just bolt out at nine at the latest. But then I have to get on and do things, so I end up doing housework."

Her friend agrees:

"Sometimes I catch myself listening to Women's Hour on the radio and doing the ironing or something and I think 'Here I am. I've become a nice little woman at home.' It terrifies me because it was the last thing I ever intended to do."

The effect of all this terror and despair can be enormous. In the last slump the suicide rate for both men and women rose dramatically. It reached a peak of 6,000 in 1931 and stayed at a high level through the 1930s. In the post-war period suicides fell from 5,600 in the early 1960s to 3,800 in 1972. With the rise in unemployment, however, more and more people have killed themselves. In 1978 the figure passed 4,000 for the first time in a decade. In the view of *The Times* medical correspondent such statistics were indicative of the intense depression brought on by the loss of a job. Furthermore,

"the wider importance of these statistics lies in their evidence of the misery, depression and despair induced by unemployment. Repeated rejections by agencies and interviews erode self-confidence in a way that can hardly be imagined by anyone without personal experience." (*The Times*, 21 July 1980)

For women this personal experience can involve a deep challenge to the very idea of working for a wage. Pat Turner, organiser of women for the GMWU noted in 1972 that:

"The right to work is not generally considered a female prerogative. Women are still considered a reliable safety margin for an unstable labour market which we can use when we have need of them and disregard at all other times."



Ten years later, as the rate of unemployment amongst women accelerates, an Action Committee for a Woman's Right to Work has been set up to stress the urgency of convincing "everyone, from the trade unions to the government . . . that women's unemployment is as serious as men's". It is as serious because women need both the money and the experience. It is serious because, while it has become conventional to talk of the 'average' household unit of a male (worker) a female (wife) and two children (dependants), such arrangements are in a distinct minority. The 1981 *General Household Survey*, estimated that just 5 per cent of households were of this form. Single women, women as the head of one-parent families, women as contributors to a family budget: these are the patterns that have developed since the war. But as one observer warned in 1981:

"It seems likely that increasing unemployment amongst men will lead them to encroach on some of the better paid, more secure and higher status areas of women's full-time work. At the same time there may be a considerable increase in demands that women, particularly mothers, should stay at home, reinforced by cuts in social services, including child day-care which enables many to go out to work anyway."

The potential unfairness of such a 'solution' is matched (in a different way) by the experiences of black people. In the 12 months from February 1980 unemployment amongst black people increased by 82.5 per cent compared with a general rise of 66.2 per cent. Black youngsters were particularly badly hit and here the Youthaid report was unambiguous. Pointing to the "disproportionate burden of unemployment which is carried by young blacks" it made clear that this was:

"a major injustice and a serious social problem. It was suggested (by witnesses) that the cause of the problem is racial discrimination reinforced by the fact that the black population is disproportionately young and that some blacks achieve few qualifications at school. For all these reasons, young black people are entering YOP in disproportionate numbers, and many of them are very well qualified."

The tone of this report was reinforced by the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee. In 1981 it drew attention to the situation in Liverpool, where 50 per cent of young black people were unemployed, seeing it as "a grim warning to all of Britain's cities that racial disadvantage cannot be expected to disappear by natural causes". A warning that was supported by a report from the Commission for

Racial Equality, *In Search of a Skill*, it argued that in Birmingham, the recruiting habits of the employers are liable to increase racial tensions between young people in search of an apprenticeship. All this, of course came in the wake of the riots: riots that confirmed the view expressed by the journal *Race Today* in 1976:

"A traditional view of unemployed workers exists. They are supposed to be demoralised victims who trot from factory to factory, work place to work place begging the high and mighty employer for jobs . . . Amongst young blacks that type is dead and possibilities of resurrection are remote. Isolated and demoralised they are not. Society either responds to their needs, or something has got to give."

In 1981 it did give, and the streets of Brixton and Toxteth burned. In his own comments on the riots, Professor David Donnison, for five years chairman of the Supplementary Benefits Commission, noted that,

"If governments, Labour, and Conservative, do nothing more constructive on behalf of people out of work it will be their fault, not that of the 'agitators' upon whom they'll seek to lay the blame, when streets burn and civilised order disintegrates."

So, in Coventry, *The Specials* sing of the "good old days before the ghost town": before Triumph's collapsed, before Talbot was Citroen Peugeot, or Chrysler, before Alfred Herbert's and the aerospace industry disappeared, before Massey's and GEC started laying off and running down. In ghost towns people worry. 'Authorities' worry about 'frustration' amongst young people: "This is why you are going to see more crime. They are going to steal to get money to survive." Black people worry about the National Front and the British Movement; they worry about violence and about fascism. In four weeks of May and June in 1981 there were 30 attacks upon black people in Coventry. "On Saturday May 18th 20-year-old Satnam Singh Gill was beaten, kicked and stabbed to death by a gang of skinheads in broad daylight in [the city] centre." In ghost towns women fear walking the streets alone.

In Coventry, *Fun Boy Three* sing: "The lunatics have taken over the asylum."



Unemployment affects everyone. It affects those in work and those out of work. It affects your horizons; how you think about things and how you plan. It affects what you will put up with, what you'll complain about and what you'll let pass. In this way too, things don't change. It was commented in 1945 that: "It is one of the paradoxes of the capitalist economy that it endows unemployment with a function. Unemployment is politically dangerous. But it also serves to keep industrial discipline." But it is a discipline achieved at a cost. In the Midlands, Brian Mathers of the TGWU, talked of a "mood of anger beneath the surface". A mood that hinges on a sense of frustration and injustice. A mood that has existed in all capitalist depressions. A mood waiting its chance to unleash itself. In 1976, the man who talked of "pride" in his work at Norton Villiers also talked about discovering something during the sit-in and the fight to save their jobs.

"At least we've learnt a few things about ourselves. As you know, Wolverhampton is not a happy place racially speaking. Well black,

white and brown have stood together here, and there's been white blokes whose minds have been changed about who we are really up against. And what we're up against isn't our coloured workmates."

They learnt that the people they were up against were "businessmen" and "politicians", particularly those who had "lost touch with the people who elected them". To this man, these are the people who cause the problem. People with minds like calculating machines. People who, when it comes right down to it, don't care or understand.

If there's to be hope – for the people in this book and the millions like them, ultimately for us all – it lies in the strength they have together. Working-class people in this country have, at key moments that stretch across centuries, acted as a decisive force for humanity and progress. They made the steel and built the cars, the railways and ships; they have done all this and also dared to think of a better world, a world that developed rather than stultified human qualities. To think and to demand it; to struggle and live for it. Much has changed since the war. The testimonies in this book tell us that much. The 'working-class movement' has experienced an enormous shift; a dislocation almost. A change as fundamental as that experienced in the collapse of steel production and the run-down of vehicle manufacture. It has been a qualitative change and an irreversible one. If the movement is to go forward, this change has to be built upon and unity created between the organised trade union experience of workers in the established 'masculine sectors' and that – less formally organised – experience of younger (often female, often black) people, unemployed or working in more fragile employment, often linked to the state. It is a unity which is, at best, precarious and which has yet to be put to the test.

At a time when unemployment statistics flow into easy talk in the media about the potential of new technology and the approach of a 'leisure society', it becomes essential that some positive programme of action is devised which aims at transforming rather than reacting to the established structures and arrangements in our society. As the crisis deepens so does the need for radical solutions intensify rather than slacken. By demanding less now, in the hope of more later, that future itself becomes tarnished. For there is no guarantee that those examples of thought and creativity, of restless human energy portrayed in this book will be put to

good use by the system as it now operates. For that to have a chance, there has to be a demand for men and women, of all ages and colours to have the *right to work*: a right to an independent life, a life of their own. To demand this now, requires that we rethink and adapt our ideas of work, of jobs and of payment; it also makes clear the need to ponder on the meaning of 'worth', of 'democracy' and 'equality'. Listen, for example, to this young woman talking about her friend who:

"rushes round all the time, organises hundreds of different things; working in an adventure playground and doing shifts at a women's centre. Last week she was at my house when a man asked what her job was. She just mumbled 'I don't do anything really. I'm unemployed.' Because she isn't paid for the things she does she won't count them as a 'proper job'."

Today, at a time when many people would love to turn the clock back, it is important to resist. Important, in the struggle for 'work', to press for an awareness of the need to expand the frontier of 'jobs'. For, in all this, it shouldn't be forgotten that important parts of 'the class thing' got shaken up in Britain in the sixties and seventies. Women got a bit more space as a result; so did factory workers generally. It was space they took because they needed it. It's space that is rapidly being taken back. But it needn't be so. Things *could* be different. To say this is to see the future as the outcome of struggle, rather than the simple product of fate or the overwhelming determinacy of technical or monetary forces. It points to the necessary interrelationship between economics (jobs, production, efficiency) and politics (the distribution of power and the way people think). It highlights the importance of relating things which happen *inside* workplaces to life beyond the factory and office walls. For while British society *is* on the rack of an immense economic crisis, it would be foolish to suggest that the crisis has only one outcome; even worse to believe that simply by "tightening our belts" things will follow their natural course toward growth and improvement. Moments of crisis are also times of choice; occasionally these choices are of great historical significance. In Britain, a possibility still exists that a better way could emerge out of the mess; a better way that values jobs ("proper jobs") on the basis of their *social* worth; a way which builds upon *all* the experiences of a class (men and women; black and white) that is *born to work*.



Notes

In putting together this book, we have tried to ensure that the narrative and the photographs flowed together. To this end we have resisted the idea of incorporating either "captions" or footnote citation on the pages. However we hope to remedy this here with both factual information about the location of photographs, and the acknowledgement of information and quotations borrowed from a variety of sources in the text. In this latter case, we hope that the various authors will accept this as a sincere and adequate expression of our debt.

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Picture Captions

Front cover Roller, Birchley Rolling Mills
 Back cover Machinist, pump factory, Tipton
 2 Steel furnaces, Bilston
 7 Chipper and torch dresser, steel rolling mills, Bilston
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 9 Labourer, lock factory, Willenhall
 10/11 Steelworkers and lockworkers, Bilston and Willenhall
 12 Steel roller, Birchley
Work Places
 13 Machinist, lock factory, Willenhall
 14 Personal locker, pump factory, Tipton
 15 Blast furnace plant, Bilston
 16 Running off molten iron, blast furnace, Bilston
 17 Sign, steelworks, Bilston
 18 Lock factory, Willenhall
 20/21 Details of lathes, milling and drilling machines, pump factory, Tipton
 22 Time clock, lock factory, Willenhall
 24/25 Lock factory, Willenhall
 27 Teeming molten steel, Bilston
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 30 Measuring steel furnace temperature, Bilston. Cleaning rough castings, Tipton
 31 Sign, lock factory, Willenhall. Chipping moulds, steelworks, Bilston
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Born to Work

Nick Hedges & Huw Beynon



"You're brought up to go to work... It's a class thing: you're used to it; you're born to it. You must work: there's the social stigma – unemployed! You are born to work" West Midlands factory worker.

BORN TO WORK is the result of a two year documentary study of working life in six factories in the late 1970s. Nick Hedges' powerful photographs and interviews are interwoven with Huw Beynon's commentary to make it one of the most important documentary photography books ever published about Britain.

BORN TO WORK does more than set the scene. It looks at working conditions, work hazards and what they do to people's lives. It illustrates the new faces in the workplace: women and those from different ethnic backgrounds. It considers the future of work.

Nick Hedges first became well-known when he was staff photographer for Shelter, the campaign for the homeless. Huw Beynon has written many books, including **WORKING FOR FORD** and **THE WORKERS' REPORT ON VICKERS** (with Hilary Wainwright, Pluto).

BORN TO WORK will be of interest not only to photographers but also social science students and anyone interested in the changing nature of work in a post-industrial society.

Images of Factory Life

Pluto  Press