Chilwell – The VC Factory - Simon Wilson

The word Chilwell probably doesn't mean much to people outside Nottingham. Today, what remains is known as Chetwynd Barracks, but it has been there since 1915 with a variety of identities.

The outbreak of the Great War in 1914 changed British life forever, including numismatics. (Apologies to non-Numismatists, but this was originally written for the numismatic Society of Nottinghamshire's Facebook page). Wars need three things – men, money and munitions. During the first weekend of the war men queued to join the services, oblivious to the reality of the coming war, and over a million joined up by the end of the year. Then the money changed. The August Bank Holiday was extended to stop people withdrawing gold from the banks, as it was needed by the Government to finance the war. It took just six days to pass the *Currency and Bank Notes Act, 1914* and design and print new notes. When the banks reopened on Friday 7th August, stocks of £1 notes were available to replace sovereigns. Ten Shilling notes became available the following week.

At the end of the war, there was a better-known consequence, as the purity of the silver coinage dropped from .925 (92.5% Sterling Silver) to .500 (50%) in 1920.

Finally – munitions. The armies on the Western Front fired approximately 1.5 billion shells. The British share of this required them to build 170 National Factories, including 27 which specialised in filling shells with explosives. This was very different to the single shell-filling factory we had in 1914 (Woolwich Arsenal). This expansion included Shell Filling Factory Number Six at Chilwell. During the war, the factory produced over 19 million shells, using over 120,000 tons of high explosive.

It was built without much central control. Lord Chetwynd, on the instructions of Lloyd George (who was then Chancellor of the Exchequer and head of the munitions committee), used his industrial know-how to build a factory. He told the government that he would not accept any interference and went about building a factory and developing a shell-filling system. Chetwynd was an interesting character who He spent his youth touring the USA, working as a deputy sheriff in Texas, a bronco buster and a cornet player, before coming back to the UK where he became a director of Vickers Armstrong and the Wolseley Motor Car Company. He was one of a number of aggressive businessmen brought into munitions production by Lloyd George and it seemed to work well as a system.

The plan of the factory was drawn up on 7 September 1915, ground was broken on 13 September. By 8 January 1916 the first shells had been filled and by 22 January a batch had been transported to Shoeburyness for test firing. They performed well and by March the factory was in full scale production. By April they were producing 7,000 shells a week. This was done using a large number of women workers. Women had been working in factories and mills for years so I'm always surprised to see it written about as if it were a new idea, but I suppose it was the idea of using large numbers of women and trusting them to do skilled jobs that was the novelty. Over 800,000 women were eventually employed making munitions.

During the war an estimated 30-40,000 restrictive Trade Union practices were suspended, about 75% of them being practices which

had restricted the use of women to do certain jobs, particularly complex jobs like working machines, which were thought to be beyond the comprehension of women. These restrictions were reinstated in 1919. Although women could now vote (as long as they were 30) they were no longer allowed to do complex things like work machinery. Unless that machinery was a loom, a typewriter or a sewing machine, which have always struck me as being quite complex.

The 38mm brass check illustrated above, was used as an ID disc for factory staff. The disc bears the crowned double C device on one side and a number on the other. The device was taken from the Chetwynd family coat of arms. The reverse has the wording THE PROPERTY OF THE NATIONAL SHELL FILLING FACTORY No 6 around the edges and CHILWELL in the centre with a stamped number.

The additional stamping (*left*) - THE VC FACTORY 1915 1918 – is a reference to events on the night of 1 July 1918 when eight tons of TNT exploded. There was some fear of sabotage at the time, and also a feeling that the hot weather might have contributed to the instability of the mixture. However, the official enquiry decided that the most likely cause was a relaxation of safety standards to enable higher production rates.

The explosion was heard 30 miles away, and could have been a lot worse – the works manager, Arthur Bristowe, took burning TNT from the line and prevented a further 15 tons exploding. He was awarded the Edward Medal for his actions, one of the highest civilian gallantry awards available at the time. However, 132 people were killed in the blast and around 250 more were injured. Despite this, the day shift turned up for work as usual next morning and production restarted. Within a month the factory was reported to have set a new production record. In Parliament, Frederick Kellaway MP suggested that it might be appropriate to follow foreign practice and award a decoration to the factory. This was not followed up officially, but the factory workers took matters into their own hands and many surviving discs are stamped with the VC inscription.

This was one of several explosions that took place at the factory (*above*), though the previous ones had killed only three people in total. It was also only one of several notable explosions in shell factories during the war – the other main ones being at Faversham (105 fatalities in 1916) and Silvertown (73 fatalities in 1917).

In all, around 600 people were killed in munitions explosions though many others died, (*Mass grave for Chilwell victims, left*). A report from the munitions factory at Gretna indicates that 145 people died during the war, 115 men and 30 women, many being from industrial accidents rather than explosions. Many more died after the war from long term health conditions associated with the use of dangerous chemicals. There seems to be no figure for that, but I have seen a figure of 400 people dying as a result of exposure to TNT. This used to turn the skin yellow, which is why munitions workers were often known as “Canary Girls”.

All things eventually come to an end, and as the Great War drew to a close the need for shells decreased. The National Shell Filling Factory at Chilwell closed, and the story of “The VC Factory” passed into history.

However, the army retained the site, and built a depot for the Royal Army Ordnance Corps (RAOC) on the site, responsible for supplies of weapons, armoured vehicles, ammunition, clothing, laundry, mobile baths and photography, amongst other things. Chilwell dealt with general and surplus stores, and, with the re-armament that preceded the Second World War, was redeveloped in 1937, when it became one of five Central Ordnance Depots and specialised in building armoured vehicles.

The blue enamel tank badge (*left*), with the "V for Victory" motif dates from WW2 - probably 1941 when a fund-raising effort is mentioned in the Nottingham Evening Post.

At its wartime peak in WW2 Chilwell COD employed 5,000 military and 7,500 civilian personnel. Eventually, after numerous reorganisations to mirror Britain's decreasing army, the RAOC left Chilwell in 1982, and the depot closed on 31 March 1982. This is commemorated by the final medal (*below*), which has the badge of the RAOC on one side and a "VC Factory" design on the other.

The RAOC eventually disappeared completely when it was absorbed into the newly formed Royal Logistic Corps in 1993. Chilwell became Chetwynd Barracks in 1995, named after Viscount Chetwynd, and if everything goes to plan the barracks will be sold in 2026 for redevelopment as housing.

Left, Memorial to the Chilwell victims erected inside the present camp.