

WOMEN CHAINMAKERS

Be Anvil Or Hammer!



THE WOMEN
CHAINMAKERS'
FESTIVAL



BCLM - TUC archives

INTRODUCTION

In 1910 the women chainmakers of Cradley Heath focussed the world's attention on the plight of Britain's lowpaid women workers. In their back yard forges hundreds of women laid down their tools to strike for a living wage.

Led by the charismatic union organiser and campaigner, Mary Macarthur, the women's struggle became a national and international cause célèbre. After ten long weeks, they won the dispute and increased their earnings from as little as 5 shillings (25p) to 11 shillings (55p) a week. Their victory helped to make the principle of a national minimum wage a reality.

Mary Macarthur proposed that surplus money in the strike fund should be used to build a 'centre of social and industrial activity in the district'. Thousands of local people turned out for the opening of The Cradley Heath Workers' Institute on 10 June 1912.

In 2004, the Workers' Institute was threatened when plans for a bypass were announced. In 2006, thanks to a Heritage Lottery Fund grant of £1.535 million, the Institute was moved brick by brick to the Black Country Living Museum where it now stands as the last physical reminder of the women's 1910 strike.



CHAINMAKING IN CRADLEY HEATH

During the 19th century, the Black Country, and especially the area centred on Cradley Heath, became the centre of chainmaking in England. Fuelled by the industrial revolution, demand grew apace for all kinds of chains – from massive anchor chains to dog leads. Some of the metalwork from this huge region would have undoubtedly found its way into the transatlantic slave trade over the time that this trade in humans was so brutally and cruelly taking place. Heavy and medium chains were made by men in factories – the anchor and chain for the ill-fated Titanic were made in this way – but lighter chains were made by women and children, typically in dark, cramped outhouses behind their homes. The women endured a double burden as they were housewives whose chainmaking came on top of cleaning, shopping, cooking, and looking after children.

This lighter chain was known as ‘hand-hammered chain’ or ‘country-work chain’ as it was often sold to farmers who had many uses for it, such as for rabbit traps, tethering animals and harnessing horses to ploughs and carts. There was heavy demand for this kind of chain in the era before mechanisation, when the army required chain for its horses and wagons, as did mine owners whose pit ponies hauled trucks of coal underground. The chain was also used to fetter convicts.

The women relied on a go-between known as a middleman or ‘fogger’ – a man or woman who handed out the work sub-contracted by larger manufacturers and delivered rods of iron two to three metres long to the women’s homes. They would have a small forge in an outhouse where they welded each link by hand, working with the most basic of tools, usually a hammer and a pair of tongs. It was hot and dirty – and very poorly paid.

The foggers collected the finished chain and took a percentage of the money the manufacturers paid, usually 25 per cent. A woman would have to work 12 to 13 hours a day, hammering up to 5,000 links a week to earn 4s to 5s (20p to 25p). The women were paid piece rates, that is, on the amount and

weight of chain they produced. Homeworkers had little choice but to accept what the fogger offered. The alternative was starvation.

SWEATED LABOUR IN ENGLAND

The women chainmakers’ work was a prime example of ‘sweated labour’ or ‘the sweated trades’ – long hours of toil for poverty wages carried out in unsanitary, often dangerous conditions. Sweated labour was widespread in factories, offices, shops and laundries, on farms, at sea and in the building of roads, railways and canals.

Several investigations towards the end of the 19th century revealed the horrors of sweated labour. Robert H. Sherard published ‘The White Slaves of England’ in 1898. Please see page 10 for further information about the context and use of the term ‘White Slaves’. This graphic account of the poverty, squalor and cruel working conditions endured by men and women in sweated trades throughout the country added impetus to the campaign against sweating. Of Cradley Heath he wrote:

“ One may come across sheds with five or six women, each working at her anvil; that are all talking above the din of their hammers and the clanking of their chains, or they may be singing a discordant chorus; and at first, the sight of this sociability makes one overlook the misery which, however, is only too visible, be it in the foul rags and preposterous boots that the women wear, or in their haggard faces and the faces of the frightened infants hanging to their mothers’ breasts, as these ply the hammer, or sprawling in the mire on the floor, amidst the showers of fiery sparks.”

Chainmaking in Cradley Heath

Until the middle of the 19th century many Cradley Heath women worked at home making nails. As machinery was introduced, this trade died out and increasingly, the women turned to chainmaking to earn extra money to relieve their extreme poverty.

The 1841 census records only 44 women chainmakers in Staffordshire and Worcestershire. By 1911, there were 2,103.* By that date, the total number of chainmakers in England and Wales, both men and women, was 7,323 of whom 6,550 lived in Staffordshire and Worcestershire, including nearly 2,000 in Cradley Heath. Of a total of 938 small-chain workshops, as opposed to larger chainworks producing heavier chain, listed by the Home Office in 1911, 918 were in the Cradley Heath area.*

After the First World War, with increasing numbers of motor vehicles and the development of electrically-welded, machine-made small chain, the hand-made industry went into decline and had almost died out by the 1950s. The last female chainmaker, Lucy Woodall, laid down her hammer and tongs in December 1973 after 60 years of labour.*

* Ron Moss, *Chain and Anchor Making In The Black Country*, Sutton Publishing, 2006.

A NOTE ABOUT MONEY

Students may not be familiar with the British currency system of 'pounds, shillings and pence' – £ s d – used before decimalisation (February 1971). There were 12 pence (12d) in a shilling and 20 shillings (20s) in one pound (£1), making 240 pence (240d) to the pound. The penny (1d) was further divided. The halfpenny (sometimes spelt 'ha'penny' and always pronounced haypenny or hayp-nee) was written as 1/2d. The penny was also divided into four farthings. Readers will find here original sums quoted, followed by the decimal equivalent, e.g. 3s 6d (17.5p). This was spoken either as '3 shillings and 6 pence' or, more often, as '3 and 6'. No one ever said 2d or 6d like we say 2p or 6p. It was always 'twopence' (pronounced tuppence) or 'sixpence'.

BABIES IN THE CHAIN SHOP

Legislation had limited the hours children could work, the Elementary Education Act of 1870 had brought in schooling for five to thirteen-year-olds, and the 1880 Education Act made school compulsory for children up to the age of ten. Despite these measures, children still often worked alongside their parents. Even before birth, life was hard and potentially dangerous, for such was the pressure to earn a living that pregnant women would work to literally within an hour or two of



the birth. One woman told Robert Sherard: 'I worked up till five that day and then I give over, because I had my cleaning to do. Our little Johnny was born at a quarter past seven.'

While researching his book *Chain and Anchor Making In the Black Country*, published in 2006, local historian Ron Moss was told by the son of a back yard chainmaker that his mother had made chains from 6 am to 6 pm, then crossed the yard into her house, and with the help of the local midwife, gave birth. She then returned to her forge and continued working until 10 pm.

More than a century before, Sherard had noted on a visit to a domestic chain shop: 'From a pole which ran across the room there dangled a tiny swing chair for the baby, so that whilst working the hammers, the mother could rock the child.'

CAMPAIGNING FOR A MINIMUM WAGE

With the election in 1906 of a Liberal government sympathetic to the plight of the low paid, there was renewed pressure for reform of the sweated industries.

George Cadbury, chocolate manufacturer, philanthropist and owner of the *Daily News*, was impressed by exhibitions in Germany of products made by homeworkers under oppressive conditions. He decided not only to use his newspaper to expose sweating, but also to finance a sensational sweated industries exhibition. The exhibition was opened in 1906 by Princess Beatrice, the King's youngest sister, and was staged in the heart of London's West End. The exhibition brought the public, especially the very wealthy, into personal contact with sweated workers for the first time.

Over 30,000 people came to see the stalls at which 45 workers, mainly women, demonstrated their skills and answered questions. Mr Cadbury compensated them for loss of earnings, and guaranteed to support any who were victimised for taking



Female chain maker, Cradley (1907)

part. Lecturers on the problems of sweating and possible solutions included the future first Labour Prime Minister James Ramsay MacDonald MP, trade union activist Mary Macarthur, and playwright George Bernard Shaw.

The Women's Trade Union Review reported that visitors were astonished 'that cigarette-making, the beading of ladies' shoes, the stitching of gloves, chainmaking and the manufacture of hosiery, jewelcases, tennis-balls, belts, ties, furniture, brushes, and saddlery were all homework trades, in which a twelve to sixteen hour day brought in, on average, earnings of 5s (25p) to 7s (35p) a week.' They were shocked to find that a dress could have been made by a reasonably paid seamstress in an airy workroom, while the buttons and trimmings were produced by a sweated worker, and that wedding cakes manufactured in hygienic conditions were likely to be packed in attractive boxes glued together in a disease-ridden tenement.

Living in poverty

In the late 19th century, Britain was one of the richest nations in the world, yet sweated labour existed at the bottom of almost every trade. The manufacture of all kinds of clothing, as well as umbrellas, boxes, toys, lace, nails, chains, shoes, leather goods, even furniture, relied on the availability of cheap labour. In 1888 a *Report as to the Condition of Nail Makers and Small Chainmakers* described the poverty of these workers:

Mrs Davis is the wife of a vice maker and has a family of ten children. Her husband is much out of work. She is making the best small chains, and is one of the best in the trade. One of her daughters blows for her. Mrs Davis says she might earn 5s (25p) per week if she struck all her time in the workshop. Two of the family were at work as chainmaker and vice maker and earned 6s (30p) and 3s 6d (17.5p) respectively. Their rent was 3s 6d (17.5p), and there was 9d (3.75p) to pay for schooling. How the family lived from one week to another she really could not tell. Several of the children were without shoes, and how to get them for the winter she did not know. They had to be content with bread and butter, or bread and lard, and tea to most meals, but sometimes they would have bacon or fish and bread to dinner. That day they had only gruel.

THE NATIONAL ANTI-SWEATING LEAGUE

As a result of the exhibition, a powerful all-party pressure group, the National Anti-Sweating League, was set up, dedicated to ending low pay and establishing a minimum wage. Its influential members included Mary Macarthur, George Cadbury, and historian and Christian socialist R. H. Tawney. The League's secretary was J. J. Mallon, later to be a trustee of the Cradley Heath Workers' Institute. The League carried on the work that the Daily News had begun by organising more large-scale exhibitions in Liverpool, Leicester, Bristol, Ilford, Oxford and elsewhere. The Manchester exhibition ran for three weeks. In Birmingham, it ran for ten.

The League played an important role in exposing the sweated trades and converting the public to the idea of a minimum wage. In October 1906, it convened a conference of trade unionists at the Guildhall, London. It was to last two days, but such was the public interest that it was extended to three. The 341 delegates, representing two million organised

workers, agreed that voluntary consumers' leagues in Britain and America, designed to dissuade people from buying the products of sweated labour, had achieved little. Legislative action was the only answer. The conference gave the minimum wage campaign the widespread support it needed to turn principle into practical politics.

THE CHAIN TRADE BOARD

Mary Macarthur, both through her involvement with the Anti-Sweating League and her own organisation, the National Federation of Women Workers (NFWW), had set her mind to helping the country's poorest paid workers. Describing her first visit to Cradley Heath, she wrote: 'The red glow of the forge fires and the dim shadows of the chainmakers made me think of some torture chamber of the Middle Ages.'

In 1909, largely thanks to her testimony before the parliamentary Select Committee on Home Work, the Liberal government passed the Trade Boards Act to establish regulatory boards and minimum rates in four low-paid trades: chainmaking, box making, lace making and finishing, and ready-made clothing. The first board established was for the chain trade. The Act did not cover the factory chainmakers, who had been organised into trade unions for some time and were better paid, but only those employed in making 'hammered and dollied' chain in small workshops and domestic forges – the type of work carried out mostly by women.

The first meeting of the Chain Trade Board was on 7 January 1910. The board was made up of three appointed members, six workers' representatives, including Mary Macarthur, and six employers' representatives, five of whom belonged to the Chain Manufacturers' Association (CMA), which supported the setting up of the board. However, relations between the employers' and the workers' representatives were strained from the start, as the employers were determined that the new rates should not be set so high that profits or business would be lost. Mary Macarthur was exasperated by the hard and unhelpful manner adopted by the CMA, whose members consistently rejected the workers' proposals as excessive.



Chainmakers' children. [1900-1920].

In March 1910, the board finally agreed on a minimum wage of 21/2d (1p) an hour to replace the old piecework system. Low as this was, for most women it meant a 100 per cent rise. Their wages had been 4s to 6s (20p to 30p) for a 50 to 58 hour week. The new rates would give them 10s to 11s (50p to 55p) a week for a 55 hour week. The board had fixed new rates which would see women's earnings double, yet it seemed the Act was destined to fall at the first hurdle.

The 'White Slaves' of England

Author Robert Harborough Sherard visited Cradley Heath to collect evidence for one of a series of articles, later published as a book 'The White Slaves of England (1898)', on the sweated trades of the land. He was taken by James Smith, secretary of the Chainmakers' Union, to a place called Anvil Yard. Sherard wrote:

Two of the girls working in the shed were suckling babes and could work but slowly. Those who could work at their best being unencumbered, could make a hundredweight of chain in two and a half days. Their owner walked serene and grey-haired among them, checking conversation, and being, at times, abusive. She was but one of a numerous class of human leeches fast to a gangrened sore.

Of Anvil Yard, with its open sewers and filth and shame, one would rather not write, nor of the haggard tatterdermalions* who there groaned and jumped. In fact, I hardly saw them. The name 'Anvil Yard' had set me thinking of some lines of Goethe, in which he deplores the condition of the people – 'zwischen dem Amboss und Hammer' – between the anvil and the hammer.

And as these lines went through my head, whilst before my spiritual eyes there passed the pale procession of the White Slaves of England, I could see nothing but sorrow and hunger and grime, rags, foul food, open sores and movements incessant, instinctive yet laborious – an anvil and a hammer ever descending – all vague, and in a mist as yet untinged with red, a spectacle so hideous that I gladly shut it out, wondering for my part, what in these things is right.

* *tatterdermalion* – a poor and ragged person



Booker T. Washington cartoon.

GLOBAL CONTEXT

At the time of the Women Chainmakers' dispute of 1910, slavery in the UK and Europe had been abolished for over 70 years after the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833. Following the Act, slaves in the colonies gained freedom after a period of forced apprenticeship. Slavery continued in America until 1865.

Despite abolition, many British people in 1910 would have been aware of the horrors and brutality of slavery and the slave trade, not least due to the insurgence of African American abolitionists (many of whom were former slaves) and civil rights activists who came to Britain to talk about their experiences.

In this context, this resource acknowledges how the British press and middle class campaigners appropriated the language of slavery, ie the 'White Slaves of England', to describe the Women Chainmakers. The Women Chainmakers were not slaves despite working in appalling and inhumane conditions. They were not owned by another human being

or forced to work for another person as Black people were in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. This does not detract from the inhumane conditions they worked in for starvation wages, nor minimise the fact that they did not own or control their means of production.

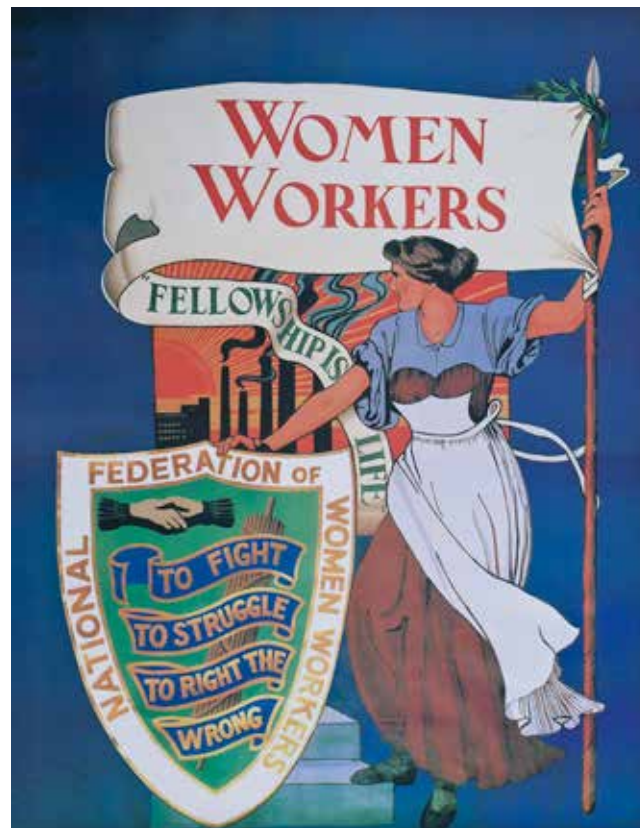
Today, it is well established that the British Industrial sector made huge profits from the slave trade, including the metalwork trades that existed in Birmingham and the Black Country. It is evident that some of the chains, cuffs, shackles or locks used in the abhorrent slave trade were made in Birmingham and the Black Country. Given their working, living and social conditions and lack of education, it is unlikely that the Women Chainmakers would have known what the chain they were making was for.

As a local resident told us: *“It is a devastating realisation that our ancestors may have produced shackles and chains that enslaved the ancestors of our friends and colleagues.”*

THE CRADLEY HEATH 'LOCKOUT' BEGINS

A few employers paid the new rates immediately, but most took refuge in a clause that allowed them to delay increasing pay until 17 August 1910. In the meantime, they resorted to underhand measures. A loophole in the Act allowed workers to contract out of the new rates for a further six months, so the CMA, together with some 30 firms and 150 middlemen outside the association, used the time until August to trick or force the women into signing forms agreeing to contract out of the minimum wage.

Very few of the women could read or write, and everyone found the legal forms confusing. Many signed without understanding what they had done. Those who refused were told that there was no work for them or that the employer could not afford the new rates.



NFWW Banner ©People's History Museum.

Meanwhile, the employers were stockpiling chains made at the old price. Their plan was to sell these stocks when the new rates became legally binding, make the majority of women unemployed, and render the Trade Boards Act unworkable.

On 23 August, when the women's union, the National Federation of Women Workers (NFWW), drafted another agreement stipulating that the minimum rates should be paid immediately, the employers refused to let the women have new materials and recalled the iron rods which had already been delivered to their workshops.

The union retaliated by calling out on strike those women who were working for less than the minimum rate – and so began the 'Cradley Heath lockout', as it was known at the time. (The employers' action was not a lockout in the true sense since the women were working in their own homes not the employers' factories and could not therefore be 'locked out'.)

On 21 August, 400 women attended a meeting at Grainger's Lane School. Every one pledged not to sign a form contracting out of the new rate. And so they laid down their hammers.

WINNING SUPPORT FOR CRADLEY HEATH'S WOMEN

Organising a strike was no easy matter. The women earned a mere pittance but families depended on every penny to survive. The women did not have the strength in numbers of men and women working in the big factories and mills of Lancashire and Yorkshire. Women working alone at home or in groups of four or five in small chainshops could be easily replaced.

However, the women chainmakers had an experienced and determined leadership in Mary Macarthur, Julia Varley and Thomas and Charles Sitch, who organised a strike that was to have significance far beyond Cradley Heath.

Julia Varley, the first female manual worker to rise to the ranks of trade union leadership, some years earlier had recruited many Cradley Heath women into the NFWW. She wrote: 'We went into the forges, talking to the women as they hammered away, awakening their consciousness to their responsibilities, appealing to their pride and their motherhood.'

In 1899 Thomas Sitch had founded the union which became known as the Chainmakers' and Strikers' Association (CSA). Now he was to play a key role in organising the strike, together with his son Charles, the secretary of the Cradley Heath branch of the NFWW. The team set up their 'lockout' office in Cradley Heath's High Street.

When the strike began, no-one could be sure that there would be sufficient funds to sustain it. Those who belonged to the NFWW could call on the union for support, but over half of the women did not belong to a union. The subscription of 3d (1.25p) per week could buy a loaf of bread, and a loaf short in a week meant less for each child, or a missed meal. The task was to bring the plight of the women

chainmakers to the attention of the nation, to put pressure on the manufacturers and raise money to support the strikers.



Mary Macarthur (1918)

SUPPORT FROM RICH TO POOR, SHORE TO SHORE

Mary Macarthur waged a stunning national campaign, which exposed the chainmasters as perpetrators of sweated labour, and which brought donations flooding in. As well as addressing meetings throughout the land, Macarthur proved an adept 'spin mistress', using the media to promote the women's cause. She offered 79-year-old Patience Round for interview as the oldest woman on the strike, and she had an eye for a good photo as well. Mary would choose the oldest and frailest looking women and would have them drape their chains around their necks, a frequent image which appeared alongside headlines such as 'Fetters of Fate' and 'Women Slaves of the Forge'.

She attracted the whole of the West Midlands' Conservative press to the side of the women,

Mary Reid Macarthur

Born in Glasgow, in 1880, Mary became the bookkeeper for the family drapery business and, at her father's suggestion, attended a meeting of the Ayr branch of the Shop Assistants' Union. Mary became converted to the cause after hearing how badly shop workers were treated by their employers.

She became secretary of the union's Ayr branch and at a socialist meeting met her future husband Will Anderson, an active member of the Independent Labour Party. In 1902, Margaret Bondfield, a member of the Shop Assistants' Union who would later become the first woman Cabinet minister, described Mary's leadership potential as something 'attaining to genius'.

By 1903, Mary had become secretary of The Women's Trade Union League. Mary's biographer Mary Agnes Hamilton wrote: 'If they were not sure at first that they wanted so powerful a blast through their organisation, they were soon to be conquered both by results and by the sun behind the storm.'

'There is nothing in the world like believing in a cause and working for it,' said Mary who soon turned her attention to the plight of Britain's sweated industries. She was a founding member of the Anti-Sweating League in 1906.

In 1906 she founded the National Federation of Women Workers (NFWW) which, she claimed, 'organised more women, fought more strikes and did more to establish women trade unionists than any other organisation'.

The women chainmakers' strike was arguably Mary's finest achievement. She would go on picket duty before daybreak and remain there long after midnight. Masterful in discussion, she knew how to pitch her cause to different audiences – and the chainmakers' strike demonstrated her universal appeal, attracting supporters from the aristocracy through to the Conservative press and middle classes.

J. J. Mallon, secretary of the Anti-Sweating League, said of Mary: 'Breathlessness is her dominant characteristic. She is always at top speed. She whirls from meeting to meeting, strike to strike, congress to congress: the street shouting behind the dust and rattle of her car.'

Not surprisingly, her sense of social justice took her into politics. Mary was close friends with both the Labour pioneer Keir Hardie and with Ramsay MacDonald.

In the 1918 General Election, the first at which women could stand for Parliament, Mary stood for Labour at Stourbridge, but came second to the Liberal candidate by 1,333 votes.

Mary was active in the campaign to establish the International Labour Organisation (ILO), set up as a League of Nations agency in 1919 by the Treaty of Versailles which ended the First World War. She was a women's labour adviser at the first ILO conference in Washington in October-November 1919.

After returning from the United States, she was diagnosed with stomach cancer and underwent two operations in 1920. Despite her failing health, she continued to throw herself into trade union work. Mary died aged 40 at her home in Golders Green, London, on January 1 1921.

That year's Trades Union Congress, meeting at Cardiff in September, paid fulsome tribute to Mary Macarthur who was described as 'our greatest woman trade unionist'.

Mary Macarthur's name lives on today through two organisations. The Mary Macarthur Scholarship is a fund set up in 1922 by leading trade union and Labour movement men and women, which provides grants for young women without formal qualifications to pursue study courses. The Mary Macarthur Holiday Trust gives financial help to go on holiday to women between 18 and 65 who have been unable to take a break for financial reasons or due to illness.

while the strike was covered by many influential regional dailies in Sunderland, Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, Sheffield, Nottingham, London, Brighton and elsewhere. Mary stimulated the interest of major national newspapers. The Times, whilst quick to point out that it did not often approve of strikes, made an exception in the case of the women chainmakers of Cradley Heath, for their 'ill-clad, destitute appearance evoked universal sympathy' (1 September 1910). The pro-Liberal Reynolds's Newspaper recycled Robert Sherard's phrase and described the women as 'The White Slaves of England'.

On 10 September, the same paper published a cartoon depicting the freed American slave and founder of the first university for black students, Booker T. Washington, sympathising with the women because 'I was once a slave myself'. Mr Washington was visiting England at the time. Nor was the media coverage confined to newsprint. The women's 'lockout' was one of the first examples of industrial action to use the power of the new medium of film to promote its cause. In September a Pathé newsreel exposed the women's working conditions and showed them marching through Cradley Heath singing songs of protest to the tunes of *Yankee Doodle* and *the Men of Harlech* – although there were only silent movies then! The film was shown at music halls in London, and at between 500 and 600 picture theatres around the country.

The grievances of the women chainmakers gained such notoriety that foreign social investigators flocked to this industrial plague spot. A German researcher, Herr Kummer, described Cradley Heath as 'hell'. An Australian, Mr Bricknell, was amazed to find that the chainmakers were living in accommodation which, in his own country, people would not house their cattle in. When Will Anderson, chairman of the Independent Labour Party, attended an international conference in Copenhagen, he found the women chainmakers the centre of conversation.



Julia Varley,
Hull Archives



Thomas Sitch

Labour politicians took every opportunity to raise the issue at their meetings. At a meeting in Sheffield, Labour Party chairman and future government minister, Arthur Henderson voiced a desire to see all the pulpits of the country hung with chains made by sweated labour. Short of that, he expressed a wish that all chainmasters might be made to see their own wives put to chainmaking.

The strikers also found support amongst the business community, the aristocracy, and the clergy, including the Dean of Worcester, while Professor Walter Rauschenbusch, an exponent of Social Christianity, wrote a prayer for all women workers which was said for the women chainmakers in churches around the country.

Cradley Heath's children entered into the spirit of the time. People stepping off the train were greeted with 'Gimme a nod, missus.' The children collected nods for good luck, marking a cross on a piece of paper for each nod. When they had a hundred, they buried the paper for two days, then dug it up, soaked it in a bucket of water for a day, and then burnt it at the forge, and while it was burning they made a wish. That wish, they said, was bound to come true. Perhaps they wished for more money in their mothers' pockets.

Julia Varley, Thomas Sitch, Charles Sitch

Julia Varley was the first female manual worker to rise to the ranks of trade union leadership. Born on 16 March 1871, she began work at the age of 13 as a sweeper in a Bradford woollen mill. She joined the Weavers' and Textile Workers' Union and within a year became the Bradford branch secretary and one of the union's executive members – still aged only 14! – and the first woman elected to the Bradford Trades Council.

From 1904 to 1907 she was a Poor Law guardian in Bradford. To gain an insight into the social problems of poor working class women, she went 'on the tramp' from Bradford to Liverpool disguised as a tramp searching for her husband.

She was one of the first campaigners for women's suffrage to be imprisoned. Indeed, she went to prison twice in 1907. She said: 'We work shoulder to shoulder with the men in the mills, and in the councils of the workers; why should they deny us the right to help us choose the men who make the laws that govern the workers?'

Julia had come to believe that men and women should be in the same unions and in 1912 she became a Midlands organiser for the Workers' Union, a large general union and one of the few which took the recruitment of women as well as men seriously. She retained this post when the Workers' Union amalgamated in 1929 with the Transport and General Workers' Union – which itself amalgamated with Amicus on 1 May 2007 to form Unite, Britain's largest trade union. She remained a prominent figure in the trade union movement, serving on the TUC General Council from 1921 to 1924 and 1926 to 1935. In 1931 she was awarded the OBE for her trade union work. She died in Bradford in 1952.

Thomas Sitch was born in Lomey Town, Cradley Heath, in 1852, the son of a chainmaker. He started his working life at the age of eight, blowing bellows in a local chain

shop, and progressed to become a striker in the chainworks. His family later moved to Newcastle-on-Tyne, where in 1877 he married Miss E. Young. Thomas and his wife had nine children.

In 1890, Thomas returned to his native Cradley Heath and gave his whole time to union work. By 1914, membership had increased to 1,300. This figure included every employee in the factory branch of the chain trade at the time.

As General Secretary of the Chainmakers' and Strikers' Association, he played a leading part in the long agitation which resulted in the inclusion of the hammered and dollied branches of the chain trade and which led to the Trade Boards Act of 1909. He played a leading role in the 1910 strike, and was one of the original trustees of the Cradley Heath Workers' Institute.

Charles Sitch was Thomas's third son, born in 1887. He left school at the age of 13 and worked as an assistant in a grocer's shop for five years. Despite having no formal qualifications, at the age of 18 Charles began a two-year course at Ruskin College, Oxford, studying economics, industrial organisation and economic history, supported by a Chainmakers' and Strikers' Association grant.

On leaving Ruskin College, he became the secretary of the hand-hammered chain branch of the NFWW. Charles was deeply involved in the agitation, which led to the passing of the Trade Board Act in 1909 and was among the first members of the board.

During the 1910 strike, Charles helped to organise many meetings, rallies and marches, and took part in the negotiations with the Chain Manufacturers' Association. Charles was also involved in fund raising and dealt with the stream of union and non-union members who came for advice to the strike office in High Street, Cradley Heath. It is likely that he organised the payment of strike pay.

Charles served as Labour MP for Kingswinford, Staffordshire from 1918 to 1931 and succeeded his father as general secretary of the Chainmakers' and Strikers' Association in 1923.



Charles Sitch

GET UP, STAND UP, MARCHING FOR OUR RIGHTS!

While Mary Macarthur travelled the country winning support for the strike, Julia Varley and Thomas and Charles Sitch organised the action in Cradley Heath and the surrounding area. There were regular meetings and marches, deputations and demonstrations. Collections were made in the streets, in factories, outside football grounds, chapels and churches and at Labour Party and trade union meetings.

Julia Varley told how she called at the dwelling of a woman who appeared to be very poor herself. 'When I saw her I was almost ashamed to tell her the object of my call. She said eagerly when I mentioned the

chainworkers of Cradley Heath, "I must do what I can to help those poor women. I will give you what I have, though it is only a ha'penny."

(Express and Star, September 1st, 1910)

Donations to the strike fund flooded in. Mary Macarthur reported that 20 people were working day and night acknowledging letters that were pouring in from all over the country. Gifts were also made in kind, including a collection of jewellery, lace from a lace-maker in Ireland, a van load of bread, and two hams for a tea for the women.

Members of the aristocracy and prominent business families also made contributions. For example, the Countess Beauchamp sent a cheque for £100. The Countess of Warwick contributed £25, with the promise of a further £25 in a month if necessary. George Cadbury pledged £5 per week for as long as the strike lasted. Novelist John Galsworthy, author of *The Forsythe Saga*, gave £10. Arthur Chamberlain – one of the powerful local family that included the Mayor of Birmingham and President of the Board of Trade, Joseph Chamberlain as well as future Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain – donated the hefty sum of 50 guineas (£52.50).

On 27 August, over 300 women chainmakers, all union members, met to receive their first week's strike pay of 5s (25p) each. Those carrying babies were paid first, but it was soon noticed that the same babies were being brought forward by different women, neighbours having taken to lending each other their children to jump the queue.

As the strike fund grew, the amount paid to union members increased to 6s (30p) per week, and it became possible to pay non-union members 4s (20p).

Mary Macarthur had hoped that contributions would reach £1,000, yet by October nearly £4,000 had been collected.

VICTORY!

On September 1, by which time 648 women were on strike, Patience Round's moving story appeared in the newspapers. The Chain Manufacturers' Association (CMA), which included many church and chapel goers and local dignitaries, had grown increasingly concerned by the label of 'sweater' that had been attached to them. Events now moved swiftly.

On Friday 2 September, the CMA agreed to meet the strikers' representatives. The women held a big procession through Cradley Heath and marched to Old Hill to picket the meeting. A photograph was taken of a group of older women chainmakers, including Patience Round, holding collection boxes and placards proclaiming 'England's disgrace'.

Patience Round

Patience Round is the only rank-and-file chainmaker we know anything about because Mary Macarthur secured newspaper interviews with her as the oldest chainmaker to take part in the 1910 strike. She was 79 at the time, which would place her birth year as 1831. A photograph shows Patience seated, holding a placard, 'England's Disgrace! Locked out after 67 years chainmaking'.

Her father was a chainmaker. Her second husband was Thomas Round, born in Mushroom Green, a miner who later became a block chainmaker. Thomas was stepfather to Patience's four children, Elizabeth, Mary Ann, Darins, and Alice. Elizabeth and Mary both became chainmakers, and Alice married a well-known local chainmaker, James Joseph Tibbitts.

Patience made chain as an outworker for both Woodhouse's and Hingley's. A newspaper cutting at the time reported: 'Her life is wrapped up in the making of chains, and she will talk for hours of the sparks and the wonderful chains she has made during her career.'

The strike was perhaps the most exciting thing that happened to her. On 1 September 1910 her story appeared in the newspapers. Patience had attended a strike meeting just a mile away from Cradley Heath to hear Mary Macarthur speak. When interviewed, she was full of excitement that she had ventured beyond Cradley Heath for the first time in her life:

'These are wonderful times. I never thought that I should live to assert the rights of women. It has been the week of my life - three meetings and such beautiful talking.'

Patience was a woman of great stamina. As a one hundredth birthday treat in 1931, she was driven around Cradley Heath in an open landau (a four-wheeled carriage). Most people in the district knew her, and she was cheered as she passed by. She died at the age of 103. Mr. Hickton, a local funeral director, recently told her family that when she died, his grandfather performed the funeral at no cost. He said: 'She was small in stature, but had the heart of a lion.'



Aged 79 at the time of the strike, Patience Round celebrated her 100th birthday in 1931.

Using the new media

A striking feature of the chainmakers' dispute is the astute media campaign orchestrated by Mary MacArthur. She secured coverage not only in long established papers like *The Times*, the *Daily News* and *Reynolds's Newspaper* but in the relatively new mass circulation papers such as the *Daily Express* (founded 1900), and the *Daily Mail* (founded 1896).

Some of the stories were accompanied by photos of the women chainmakers. It was only 13 years previously that the first half-tone photos had appeared in newspapers. Even more astonishing is how she harnessed the power of the moving image. It was only two months before the strike, in June 1910, that the first ever British newsreel was shown, the weekly *Pathé's Animated Gazette*, but Mary was quick to see the possibilities for publicising the chainmakers' cause to a mass audience.

In September 1910 a *Pathé* newsreel film vividly depicted the arduous nature of the women's work. A scene in which children are playing around the forge was followed by a procession of the women, accompanied by a large crowd of sympathisers, marching down the streets. The manager of *Pathé* estimated that the film was seen by 10 million people throughout the country. The film is, sadly, now lost. It depicted the employers as the villains of the piece and an outraged nation rallied to the chainmakers. Thanks in large part to the media campaign, money flooded in to the strike fund to sustain the strikers until the third week in October 1910 when the last employer agreed to pay the new rates.



Mary MacArthur, Chainmakers' Lockout, Cradley Heath. 1910.

The employers had seriously underestimated the support the women would receive from all classes of the public, nor had they reckoned with the resolve of the women themselves.

They also began to see the strike as an opportunity to remove middlemen from the trade. Furthermore, the government, in accordance with Trade Board legislation, refused to tender contracts to firms not paying the new minimum rates.

This was a strong bargaining weapon. At the meeting on 2 September, the CMA offered to pay minimum rates in its members' factories, but only if the NFWW guaranteed to support financially women who continued to refuse to work below the rate.

Essentially, the CMA was asking the union to protect it against unfair competition from non-associated masters and middlemen refusing to pay the minimum rate. The NFWW decided to accept the CMA offer because the employers had agreed to pay the minimum rate, and, thanks to the generosity of the public, the fighting fund could keep those women refused the minimum rate by their employers out on strike.

Members of the CMA signed a document, agreeing to pay the minimum rate, which was then forwarded to the Trade Board for the firms' names to be included on its register. This became known as the White List.

This was the turning point, but by no means the end of the dispute. The following day, Saturday 3 September, the number on strike actually increased to 800 when the Cradley Heath Town Band headed a huge march to Old Hill two miles away to successfully persuade the chainmakers there, who did not know about the increased rates, to 'throw down their hammers'.

On 6 September, Trinder and Co. agreed to pay the new rates and 120 women returned to work. Other companies gradually followed suit but it was necessary to keep up the pressure. In the second week of September, the women chainmakers secured the support of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) meeting in Sheffield, as Julia Varley and other members of the deputation chained themselves to the platform.

The Daily News wrote: 'On the flower-decked platform appear three worn and pale-faced women clad in black, and holding forth a chain... one of them spoke... But though she scarcely uttered 20 words, the remembrance of her terrible misery gave an eloquent ring to her pleading voice. "For making this yard of chain, she said, we get a penny"'. The congress pledged the women chainmakers the moral and financial support of the whole organised labour movement.

On 3 October, another procession marched through the town to a meeting at the Empire Theatre where free bread was distributed. It was not until 19 October that the last meeting was held, by which time the CMA had agreed only to deal with foggors who had signed up to the new rate and only a handful of employers had failed to sign the White List.

The strike was effectively over but the mood was subdued rather than triumphant. J. J. Mallon, secretary of the Anti-Sweating League, described the atmosphere as unusually quiet 'like a prayer meeting'. Perhaps the women sensed that something special was coming to an end. The dispute ended on 22 October when the last employer signed the White List. The women chainmakers of Cradley Heath had won a famous victory through their determined and well-publicised strike.

When Mary Macarthur returned a few months later they presented her with a gold bracelet watch. Over 2,000 women were there to greet and thank her – and for once their heroine was lost for words.

THE WOMEN'S LEGACY

The women's victory was to have a huge impact right across the British labour movement. The success of the dispute motivated many to see the benefits of organising in trade unions. The years 1910 to 1920 saw the NFWW's membership rise from 2,000 to 20,000.

The chainmakers' strike was not just a local dispute. It was, in effect, a campaign to establish and enforce a minimum wage

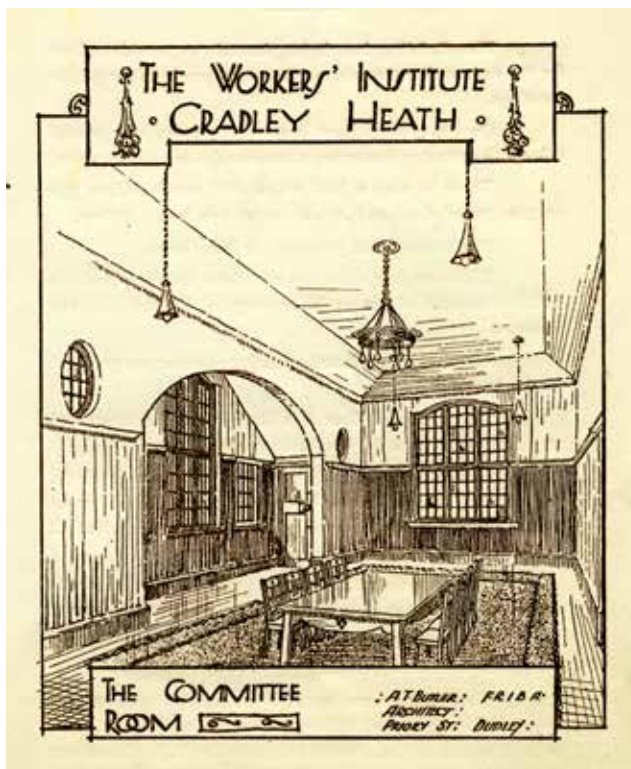
The Cradley Heath Workers' Institute

With its geometric shapes, projected gables, leaded windows and its emphatic signage in green faience tiles, the Workers' Institute was an impressive demonstration of the design style of the Arts and Crafts movement. Inspired by the writings of John Ruskin, the movement's adherents believed that the work of craftsmen and women should be meaningful and a source of pride, while machines relieved them of the tedium of mundane repetitive tasks. The Arts and Crafts movement influenced architecture, decorative arts, furniture and even garden design. Its leading exponents included William Morris, Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Walter Craine.

Using the skills and enterprise of local craftspeople, such as the Cradley Boiler Company, one of the Institute's unique features is its structural steel roof – a design supported on just five slender trusses.

The Cradley Heath Workers' Institute has been re-sited at the Black Country Living Museum in a 1930s-themed street.

On the first floor, the building's large committee room is set in 1935. The former trustees' office is now the Mary Macarthur Room.



Drawing of WI from an original leaflet found as part of the WI archive collection.



in an industry notorious for low pay and appalling conditions. Soon, more trade boards were established in other industries, as the government accepted for the first time that every worker was entitled to a living wage.

Had the strike failed, it is probable that the trade board policy would have failed too. Thus the women chainmakers' lockout was to have a lasting effect on wage law, as Britain played an internationally pioneering role in regulating low pay. Trade boards and wages councils guaranteed minimum wage levels for many decades, particularly in low-wage service industries where trade unions were not well organised.

Eighty-eight years after the strike, in 1998, the Labour government passed the National Minimum Wage Act which extended minimum pay protection to all industries and raised the wages of an estimated 1.5 million people.

The strike demonstrated the determination of a group of low-paid women to successfully fight for a living wage. It is a struggle that deserves to stand alongside that of the Bryant and May matchgirls' strike of 1888 in the annals of labour history.

CRADLEY HEATH WORKERS' INSTITUTE

When the strike was won there was still £1,500 in the fund. Mary Macarthur proposed that, to recognise the women's achievements, the surplus should be used to build a 'centre of social and industrial activity in the district' which was to be the Cradley Heath Workers' Institute.

The site chosen for the building was a spoil heap in Lomey Town, Cradley Heath, the venue for many rallies during the lockout.

Construction of the Institute, a two-storey building designed by the Black Country architect Albert Thomas Butler, began in the winter of 1911. On June 10 1912, thousands of local people turned out to see the Countess of Dudley officially open the new building – which in its style and design was unique in the Black

Country. It was described as 'a queen among beggarmaids' by Philip Snowden, future first Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer.

The Workers' Institute was used for educational meetings as well as social gatherings and as a trade union centre which dispensed advice on employment matters and benefits. The Workers' Institute remained a focus of community life over the years. Between 1915 and 1933 its auditorium operated as a picture house and was better known by locals in the area as 'The 'Stute'. The cinema was later transformed into a snooker hall until the 1950s when the Post Office used it as a sorting office up to 1995.

In the 1940s the first floor committee room was also used as a dance academy, while for much of its history the building's offices were used by the Chainmakers' and Strikers' Association and by the National Union of General and Municipal Workers (now GMB), as well as a local solicitor.

CELEBRATING THE CHAINMAKERS

In 2004, the Workers' Institute was threatened with demolition because of a planned by-pass. Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council approached the Black Country Living Museum which, with the local community, including the TUC Midlands and local trade unions, launched a campaign to save the building. Supporters were invited to sponsor a brick and in 2006 the Heritage Lottery Fund awarded the Museum a £1.535 million grant to take the building apart brick by brick and rebuild it at the Museum site in Dudley. As the Museum's director and chief executive, Ian Walden, said: 'The Heritage Lottery Fund's decision ensures this historic building has a promising future – one that fulfills Mary Macarthur's original vision.'

Until the campaign to save the Institute, the story of the Cradley Heath strike was, sadly, largely forgotten, but in 2005 the Museum, in association with the TUC Midlands and many unions, held the first Chainmakers' Festival. Now an annual event, featuring

national entertainers and speakers, including a 'MaryMacarthur' in period costume delivering one of Mary's rousing speeches and a procession of modern unions and 'strikers' dressed as Edwardian chainmakers, the festival ensures that this historic episode is celebrated by the local community and trade unionists from all over the country.

THE CHAINMAKERS' FESTIVAL TODAY

Today, the Women Chainmakers' Festival is coordinated by the TUC Midlands bringing together trade unions and community groups to host the only Trade Union run festival to celebrate the success of women. It is held at the Mary Macarthur Gardens in Cradley - Heath the home of the 1910 dispute.

The Gardens are watched over by an inspiring statue depicting Mary Macarthur and the women Chainmakers.

The Festival today is a family friendly event bringing alive memories of the past whilst inspiring visions for the future through street theatre, re-enactments, live metalworking, political stalls and speeches, music, children's activities and entertainment.

As we have learnt, the Women Chainmakers worked in inhumane conditions; they did not own or control their means of production. The women had few rights and their living and social conditions, lack of education and limited experience outside of their immediate community made them vulnerable to exploitation.

The Women Chainmakers' appalling working conditions could correspond with our understanding of modern-day slavery—exploitation, coercion, manipulation and an abuse of power by employers. We must remember that the plight of these women only became known due to the Sweated Industries exhibition of 1906.

Today, in Britain, Sweated Labour still exists. People work in precarious circumstances,

in unsafe working conditions, for starvation salaries, and they remain unorganised and exploited.

There is much to celebrate and commemorate about the women Chainmakers of Cradley Heath and, sadly, their example and circumstances remains relevant to many working in Britain today.

The Chainmakers' Festival brings the Black Country community together with the Trade Union movement. Through examining our history we can deliver a better future for women and our wider society.



Procession from BCLM Chainmakers' Festival, Mike Hessey

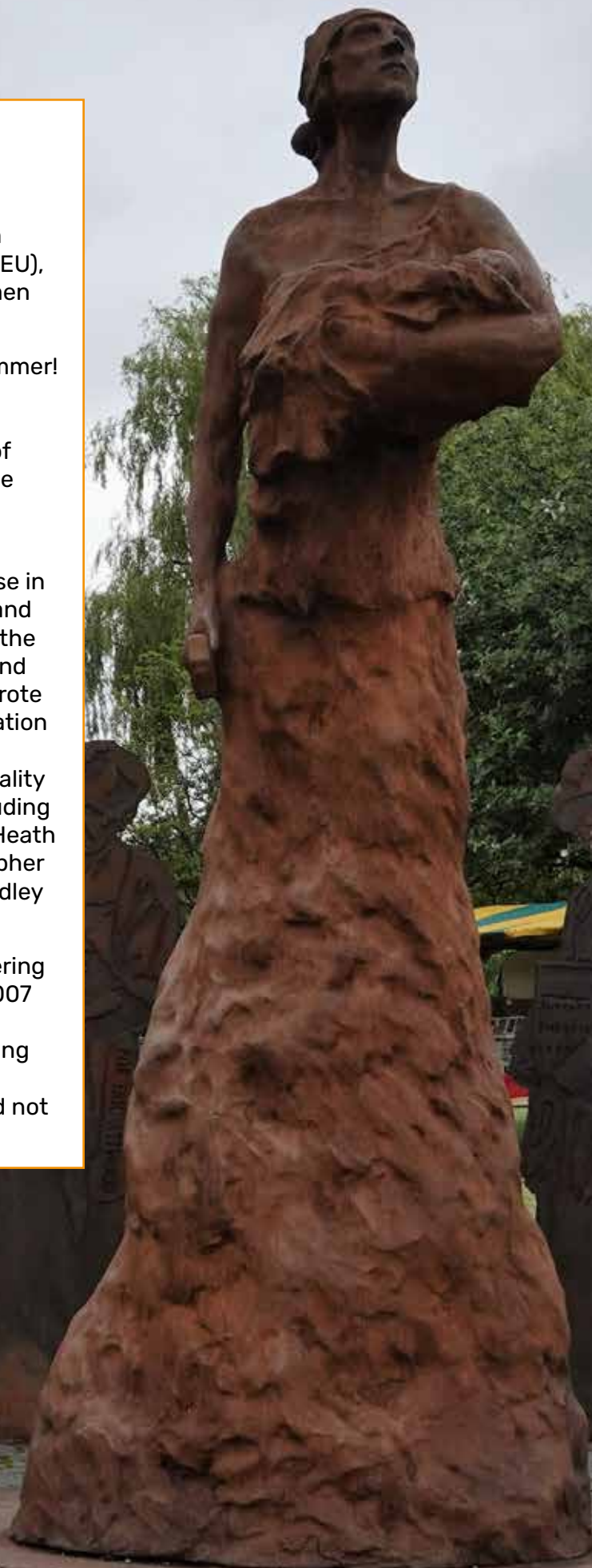
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Mary MacArthur & Keir Hardie (1914). Copyright belongs to the Press Association.

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