

## **Irene Ainsworth - War Work in an Aircraft Factory**

**So could you tell me your name please?**

Do you want the full name?

**Yes.**

Irene Ainsworth.

**And, er, how old are you now?**

November. I'll be eighty.

**Eighty, right, yes, and could you tell me please the circumstances behind the stories that you...**

Well, I would say mainly is war work, because I did, in the early days, I mean, I was fourteen when the war began, and I just went to a sort of a small library and sweet shop you know in the beginning. And from there I went into the city and I was with a gown shop. Quite a high class gown shop.

And it was from there that I was sort of called up if you wish to put it that way. And of course you had the choice of joining the forces or doing essential work. I would have liked to have gone into the forces but mothers those days keep you at home. (laughs) And so I went to, on Park Street there's...I don't know whether it's still the same...a technical college there, and there's a crowd of us there, who went there, and learnt...I don't know exactly how long...the ways of aircraft. And then we went to, what in those days was called Blackburn's Aircraft, which now is Hawker Sydelley's, now British Aerospace. Anyway, it was Blackburn's in those days, and we worked on the Fleet Air Arm planes, I can't remember the name of them. Can you remember the name of them John? Just small planes, of course.

*\*John Ainsworth\** It wasn't the Skua. Was it the Skua?

Ah yes, I think that was it. It was the Skua.

**The Skewer?**

And I thoroughly enjoyed my time there, I really did. I loved it. And I worked...I did...used to fit the joystick, you know, in the cockpit. And underneath there was a thing called the de-icing tank, and I used to scramble underneath and do that, and then I didn't do that all the time, and then I worked on the hydraulic system, and I was there, then, until I was made redundant. And what year would that be, I wonder?

*\*John Ainsworth\** Well you'd be on...World War 2...you'd be on 'til the end of the war.

More or less. It would be wouldn't it, yes?

*\*John Ainsworth\** And that's when you went over to...

And then I was (indistinct) Earl Cement, melting. It's no longer there is it, now?

*\*John Ainsworth\** Oh, no. It's all gone now. Just a quarry left.

Mmm, and I worked in the laboratory there until, well, just before we were married, wasn't it?

\*John Ainsworth\* You see, you were, erm...it was 1943 and we were stationed here. That's when I met her.

**Yes.**

\*John Ainsworth\* And she was still working in the gown shop then, Irene Leonard's in town, and I used to go in town to meet her when she came from work, and it wasn't at...it wasn't until we left to go over to Normandy that you were directed into war work. I think they were still at Irene Leonard's when we...

I mean I would have to be eighteen to be called up, wouldn't I?

\*John Ainsworth\* Yes, you were.

So I would be working at the gown shop from being...

\*John Ainsworth\* Fourteen,

Fourteen?

\*John Ainsworth\* Er no, no, fifteen.

No no, just...nearly sixteen, until eighteen. That was it.

\*John Ainsworth\* I think you were still at the gown shop when we left Hesse to go south ready to go over to Normandy.

Well yes it must be.

\*John Ainsworth\* And you went into war work. You were directed into Blackburn's on aircraft production, and you had to train at the Technical College. You've got a photograph somewhere.

Yes, but I really and truly did love working. I do like working with tools, you know? (laughs)

**Yes. So, you wore overalls...**

Yes.

**...big boots, presumably?**

No, nothing...I can't remember wearing anything protective on our feet, but we did wear denim-type overalls, all-in-one, you know?

**Yes, so you'd come home on a night covered in oil, presumably?**

No, no.

**You were quite clean?**

No, quite clean work, really. Yes, except the dust from the floors, and all the rest of it.

\*John Ainsworth\* You'd wear a turban.

Oh, yes. Yes. (laughs at the memory)

**So you wore a turban to keep your hair in place?**

Yes, yes, that's right 'cause of any machinery. Mind you, it didn't actually come into contact with machinery. No, nothing actually working, you know, mechanical.

**So you were in the planes fitting the components?**

That's right, yes, and we used to use what was called...I don't know whether you know what that is...a drill, and it was called a 'windy drill'.

\*John Ainsworth\* Yes, because it was worked by er, air.

**Oh, compressed air?**

Yes, yes, and er, sometimes it used to go wrong and it used to spurt out with this mud-like liquid. (laughs) Why? Don't ask me why.

\*John Ainsworth\* It was the stuff and air was under pressure.

Well, I suppose that...but it was all this liquid used to all spurt (makes spurting movement) out, you know? And then we used to, we had a supervisor, she was a female as well, and every now and again we would get what was called a 'snag sheet' 'cause if the inspector, standing on the assembly line, found something that wasn't, you know, as it should be, it was sent back to the supervisor and your 'snag sheet', and whatever the job was, and whoever had done it used to have to go down the assembly line and correct it, you see. I only had that happen to me once, and the thing was, to get to the part I had fitted, it was only a minor detail really, I had to get a screw, the head of a screw...oh, what is it now?

\*John Ainsworth\* You mean a ...

Not the screw itself, but the...what goes on...the nut! The nut.

\*John Ainsworth\* It's a bolt!

No, no, the nut that goes onto that.

**Yes.**

And to get to it I had to manoeuvre round...you know what Bostick is?

**Yes.**

Yes? You had to stick the nut on the Bostick 'cause everybody's work was in front of yours then, you see?

**Yes.**

So you had to slither round here (indistinct) (mimes awkward arm position to fit nut)

**If you dropped the nut as well.**

But that only happened once to me, 'snag'.

It was a happier time, though, wasn't it?

Oh, yes!

You were surrounded by men weren't you?

Yes! (laughs)

**So, there were men working there as well? I've got this picture...(of a women-only staffed factory)**

It was essential work, you see, so they were deferred from the forces.

**The engineers stayed at home in the factories?**

We had such people as that, the more important people, yes.

**Right. I see.**

Yes, but we had fun as well.

\*John Ainsworth\* And you used to get paid for that? (jokingly)

Oh, no, John! (laughs) That's a bit we remembered that now.

**Would you get paid more or less than you would have been earning if it was peace time, or did they try and keep you in the same kind of financial bracket?**

I would say it would be more or less the same, wouldn't you?

\*John Ainsworth\* Well you wouldn't get a great deal working in a gown shop, would you, not in 1943?

No, you had to make your money up with commission, in those days.

So, I suppose you could say that some people were better off and some people were a lot worse off depending on where they came from in the, sort of, peace time..? (employment world - their careers)

Mmm, probably.

\*John Ainsworth\* You handed your wages over to your Mam when you got home?

Oh, yes, definitely!

\*John Ainsworth\* She would have been pleased then, wouldn't she?

Sorry?

\*John Ainsworth\* If you were getting more money she would be pleased, wouldn't she?

Well, I suppose so, yes, certainly would. (laughs)

**What time did you start on a morning?**

I think it was half eight.

**Half eight, yeah, and how did you get to work in those days?**

By train, catch a train here.

**So where did you live? You lived, at the time..?**

So I lived...do you know Tarragon?

**Yes.**

Yeah, just up the hill, not the lower part, but up the hill, there. What was called, in the beginning, 'Honeymoon Row' because that's where married couples first went to live. (laughs) Anyway, yes, and at that time there was I was working at the aircraft factory, my mother was coming to work, 'cause my mother worked as well, didn't she?

*\*John Ainsworth\** Oh, yes, aye.

And she worked at Earl Cement where I eventually did go to, and my brother worked at Earl Cement, so we all three used to go out on a morning. We used to walk all the way to the Hessle Station and then get the train up coming back.

*\*John Ainsworth\** Jack, your brother, he served his time at Brough, didn't he? (the war years?)

Oh, he was a tool-maker.

*\*John Ainsworth\** He was a tool-maker. He served his time.

So he was deferred, you see, wasn't he? He was essential work. So you get this sort of thing, you see?

**And you finished working at the aircraft factory at the end of the war?**

Er, no, let me think now. Do you know, it's a bit hazy, with me, cause I went over to Earl Cement didn't I? I think the war was...

*\*John Ainsworth\** Yes, but when? Was the war over, like? Had Germany surrendered?

Yes, I think the war had finished, then.

*\*John Ainsworth\** Well, I mean, when...

There was a sort of transition period between that and going over there.

*\*John Ainsworth\** It was May 1945 when Germany surrendered.

Yes, and I would be nineteen then? 'Cause, I mean, it wasn't long after that you and I were married, I mean...

*\*John Ainsworth\** You were twenty then.

No, forty six when we were married.

*\*John Ainsworth\** Yes, but you were twenty when the war ended, and I would imagine you must've had a party, didn't you, surely, when the war ended?

We had a party for the kids in the street. In Tower Hill, you see, now, it fronts onto what is now the park. It wasn't a park then, it used to be a real old rambling house with an old lady that used to live there with pots of money, you know? And then there was thick ground that used to go right down as far as Trinity Grove, so of course soldiers, when they came, they occupied that, and that is how I met John. You probably already know that.

**Yes.**

And so we did a lovely street party for the kids, but er, I suppose we, you know, had a celebration amongst ourselves, among girls together, sort of, when we all...

**Yes, on the factory floor, sort of thing?**

Yes, yes.

**So you're...because I'm thinking that when the war finished the men who would occupy these positions, these jobs in the factory would come back, therefore displacing the female workforce.**

Yes, exactly.

**So that's what happened is it? The company went back to commercial...?**

Yes because a lot of, like John's place of work, the job was left open for them to return to, weren't they?

*\*John Ainsworth\* Yes.*

You know, and I think, probably, what must have happened same, sort of, whatever job you had...

*\*John Ainsworth\* Jobs were held open.*

Yes, so they just took over again, you see?

*\*John Ainsworth\* The war work had come to an end, they could no longer be directed, if the war had ended, mind, Japan hadn't packed up, you see?*

Oh no, no, that's true.

**So you still needed to provide aircraft for the Far-East and..?**

*\*John Ainsworth\* That's right, so I think war work was still essential.*

Having left, finished...my father, he worked at Earl Cement as well, in the sub-station, and he knew there was this job going in the laboratory, you see, so he says, "Would you like to try for that?" so I said, "That's OK." You know. I hadn't any knowledge of anything like that, but it was so easy to get into, and that was a matter of know the component parts that go towards making cement, and one of them is called 'slurry', and you used to have to go and take samples, come back, and you'd all these little weighing machines, like, and you used to have to weigh it, and grind it up, you know, and test it, and then you used to work it out in fractions and put that, what the total came to, and it was lovely. I enjoyed doing that as well! (laughs) That wasn't war work, of course.

*\*John Ainsworth\* Thinking about it, when, I mean, I was de-mobbed in '46, in April, and we got married in May 1946, now where were you working then?*

Well, my last job was there, at Earl's.

\*John Ainsworth\* You were working...you were at Earl's then?

Mmm.

\*John Ainsworth\* Well I reckon you could only have been...

I couldn't have been working that long there.

\*John Ainsworth\* No, you couldn't have been.

No, because I didn't have another job there, 'cause we married, and I went up north to (indistinct) didn't we?

\*John Ainsworth\* Yes.

**So you...**

I mean, we was girls, I mean, the war was on but you didn't have any fear, never seemed to have any fear, you know? We still went on with our daily tasks but I mean, as I say I worked at this, er, the gown shop in Hull, and there'd been severe bombing the previous night, when they used to get the bus, go into town, and you didn't know what you were going to find, and it was just sheer devastation, you know? You know Hammond's, or Fraser's or whatever they call them now, that was just...

\*John Ainsworth\* It is Hammond's again now.

I think it is, yes. All that was left was just the uprights, you know, everything else was just completely...all the way down there was just flattened. Our shop managed to...(survive). You know Hull, of course? You know...what's the jewellers, now, on the opposite corner to British Home Stores?

\*John Ainsworth\* Well, you know where British... British Home Stores shop is?

**Yes.**

And where the entrance is? What's the name of the street which goes down? Waltham Street.

\*John Ainsworth\* Eh?

That's Waltham Street.

\*John Ainsworth\* That's Waltham Street? And the shop on the very corner is a jewellers.

Is it Samuel's?

\*John Ainsworth\* That used to be Irene Leonard's.

Anyway, that used to be the gown shop, and if you look there's a show (window) like that (indicates curve) well we used to display wedding gowns there.

**Did that survive bombing?**

That survived! Didn't get touched at all, now right opposite did.

**The building, as it was then, is still intact?**

That's right.

**But with obviously different business ownership?**

Yes, yes, as I say it's a jewellers now.

\*John Ainsworth\* I used to meet her there.

But, er, and of course, you were ruled with a rod of iron in those days, you know? (laughs)

**Did the aeroplane factory come under any, sort of, intense bombing pressure?**

No, not to my knowledge.

**I'm surprised. You would have thought something manufacturing...**

Yes, yes, and it's near the river as well.

\*John Ainsworth\* There was a piece published not so long since, how they set up a false impression by, along the banks of the Humber, and it was to give aircraft the impression that was Hull, and that may well have protected Brough, may well have protected Brough.

**Because that would have been a prime target, wouldn't it, for enemy bombing?**

That would, yes, you would certainly think so.

\*John Ainsworth\* 'Cause I mean, it's a Hell of an area...place. Big sheds for construction of aircraft.

**So that, then, became British Aerospace, which is still there today?**

That's right, yes. Indeed.

**So you can't remember any kind of damage or fire?**

None whatsoever, and I'm sure I would have done, you know, if it did happen I would have remembered that, but no, I can't remember anything like that.

**Whilst you were working in there did you ever have a fear in the back of your mind that one day aircraft might bomb the place?**

No.

**You never even considered that?**

No! (laughs)

**Is that due to the fact that you were young, and you were a bit naïve?**

I think so, yes. You just got on with your job and you enjoyed your life and...you know? It's funny that you should say that because it would have never occurred to me that...well, you know, I would never have been frightened or

anything like that, but I wasn't. None of us were! I mean, I was in the Plaza cinema, which is now the supermarket, the Spar supermarket, and do you know Buttfield (phonetic)? Well, they dropped a landmine there, you know, and I was in the Plaza that night and urgh (makes rocking movements like an earthquake has struck). And they always, if the air raid sirens went, they always used to flash on the screen, "Sirens are now sounding. Anybody wishing to leave the cinema must do so in an orderly fashion." You know?

**So you could actually feel the landmine going off as you were sat watching a film?**

Mmm, but I suppose there's no way I'm going out! (laughs) We just stayed where we were.

**You'd paid your money, you're staying!**

That's right, yeah! Well, when you're that age you don't go chucking money around. Anyway, when we came out, with some of my friends, some girls and that, because as you know it was a blackout, and you couldn't see a damned thing. You were allowed a little torch with a sh(ield), a cover over, so you can find your way, well where Somerfields are now, it used to be Jackson's in those days, I mean, we just found that we were just treading over glass. All the windows must have been shattered, you know, as we were just crunch, crunch, crunch on this glass.

Anyway, we got home, of course, and my mother was (wails) you know? (laughs)

**Worried about you?**

Yes, because she'd heard it, naturally. But the thing was that, we got so many air raids, I mean, we got sick of having to get up out of our beds and go into the air raid shelter, cold winter nights, you know, and in the end my father says, "Oh, we're not going to have this!" so he made it comfortable with bunks, you know, and when it was time for bed we used to just go straight in there.

**Was that the one at the bottom of the garden or a communal one?**

Baby Anderson. Anderson shelter.

**So it was just for your family?**

Your own, your own. That's right, yes.

**So some nights your Dad used to put you to sleep in the air raid shelter rather than get you up?**

Yes, some of the raids became, you know..?

**Every night?**

...very, very regular, so he said, "This is no good." So, that's what we did. You can imagine what everybody... 'cause everybody along the road was doing the same thing in the end, you can imagine what we all looked like when we crawled out with...you know, (makes dishevelled actions) (laughs) but it was the sensible thing to do really, you know, it really was. When you look back on those days you think, "How long did I survive, you know, with rationing and all this sort of thing?"

\*John Ainsworth\* We enjoyed our stay in Hessle didn't we, when we used to go dancing in the Town Hall.

Oh, the Town Hall, yes. That's about the only place you could go, really, in those days.

\*John Ainsworth\* We used to go in the Plaza centre, mind, as well. Do a bit of courting there.

Two shows a week at there, you know? (laughs)

**So, looking back, would you say that the women who worked in the factory, providing the aircraft, they felt that they were really helping the men that were out there, and really doing their duty?**

Oh, yes.

**Or was it a sense of, you know...(forced to do it)?**

Something you'd got to do? No, no.

**So you felt like you were really going to make a difference?**

That's right. Oh, yes. But we were really only teenagers, you know, when you think of it.

\*John Ainsworth\* A school pal of yours, she joined the land army, didn't she?

Yes, a friend of mine. They did a damned good job as well.

\*John Ainsworth\* Must be a hard life, that! (laughs)

**Is that the land army is...the provision of food, is it?**

That's right. They used to work for the farmers, you know, and they DID work hard! And they were up early on a morning, and...

**Yes, long hours. Heavy work.**

\*John Ainsworth\* Cold weather, you know?

I couldn't have chosen that, like.

**Did you have the option of that, at the time?**

Yes! Oh, yes, well, it all depends how it went. If they were in need of more in that section, then, of course, they would take you on, but a lot of girls, oh, they want to go in the WRENs because they liked the uniform! (laughs)  
Uniform!

**I suppose if you'd no experience of it, your choices were based on that kind of thing, weren't they, at the time?**

Yes. As I say, teenagers, you know, like teenagers now, you know, just the same. Look for the fashion, normally, yes. (laughs)

**Thank you very much.**

Oh, you're welcome.

\*John Ainsworth\* So there, you might be on the Internet!

(Returning to a point made off tape about fear during this time)

Yes, I think that there was just one thing that worried us during the war years, and that was if they dropped the gas bombs, and that, I know, as far as I was concerned, I really was feared, when there was an air raid on, not any other time, but once the air raid started, you know, that was the one thing.

And there was one night, my mother was a really timid person, she looked out of the air raid shelter and looked up. She says, "Ah! She says, "They're dropping the gas bombs. Get your masks on! Get your masks on!", and there's four of us sat looking at one another (imitates gasmask on face and laughs). Do you know what it was? The 'vary lights'. You know the vary lights that they dropped, didn't they, used to drop?

\*John Ainsworth\* The flares. They used to drop flares.

The flares. Like the flares, you know, and of course she imagined that was gas. (laughs) And all of us sat...you felt such a fool, and my father, he was in the Home Guard, you know, Captain Mainwaring and all this, you know? Dad's Army, and my father was in the home guard and, I mean, I can't remember tales now, but he did used to come home and absolutely...Dad's Army, you know, to a tee, I mean, they'd got it off really well, you know, when they put that show on, and he came back and saw my mother and (laughs) "What's the matter? What's the matter?"

"Oh! she says, "I thought they were dropping gas bombs." she says.

"You silly woman!" (both laugh heartily)