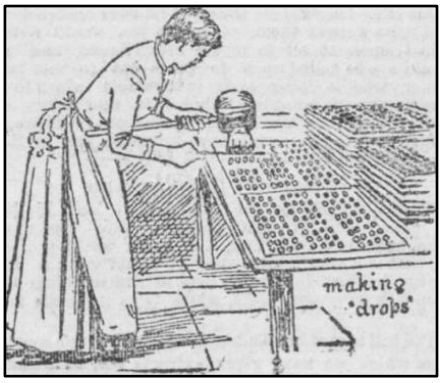
Sheffield General Cemetery Trust

Women in the Confectionery Trade



Employee at Don Confectionery Co. Ltd. *Source: Sheffield Daily Telegraph, 14 March 1890* *

In Victorian Sheffield women played a significant role in the confectionery trade in spite of the many challenges they faced compared to their male counterparts. Infant death was still very common throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, causing poor health and distress for many women. Both societal and educational barriers limited women's access to the workplace. Notably, at this time, their roles as good mothers and useful wives were fundamental expectations.

Unless their occupation fitted with traditional female expectations such as maid or nurse, women working were customarily frowned upon and made to feel that were unsuitable for marriage. This was based on the sustained belief that employing women outside the home would lead to their moral and spiritual degradation, rendering them inadequate to raise the next generation. We know that in many cases census records did not record working women's occupations accurately. Irregular working schedules, childcare and other home-based activities, alongside work within family-run businesses, all resulted in a common practice whereby the 'occupation' column in census returns was often left blank for women. For this reason it is very probable that women's presence within developing industries like confectionery was under-recorded, as well as under-valued.

Participation in the Industry

Women's active participation in the workplace and in the confectionery trade varied by social class: middle and lower middle class women who were married with children, and had so gained a respectable recognised status in society, were sometimes employed as part of their husband's businesses and recorded as such in census returns. One example was Elizabeth Butler (1830-1896), wife of the prominent confectioner Charles Butler, who was recorded as a manageress. The 1881 Census recorded the Butler family living at Brooke Villa, Brooke House, Fulwood. Charles was listed as a master confectioner employing four men and three women. Elizabeth was listed as a manageress in a sales shop and three of their daughters, Annie, Sarah and Effie, were assistants in the sales shop.

Elizabeth died in January 1869 and was buried in the Anglican area of the Cemetery in plot G1 91.

Some women became assistants in their parents' confectionery business. Clara, the daughter of William Henry and Martha Streets, was also a saleswoman in the family confectionery shop. Their son, Frederick Robinson Streets, married Sarah Ann Butler and together they ran a confectionery sugar-boiling business where their children were also employed. However after marrying these young women were generally expected to leave the confectionery trade and focus on raising a family. Charles Butler's fifth daughter Effie's role in the confectionery trade ended when she married.

Annie Elizabeth Burr (née Butler) (1855 - 1913), the eldest daughter of Charles Butler, was also an assistant in her father's business. As soon as she married her father and her husband Frederick Burr began a business venture together whereby Frederick acted as Charles' agent and sold his products further afield, in Manchester. Although Annie did not formally return to the confectionery trade until after Frederick's death, it is reasonable to assume she took a substantial role in her husband's business, using her earlier confectionery experience. As a widow she continued to be a longstanding participant in the trade, first in Manchester, and then back in Sheffield after the death of her father. On the occasion of her death a notice in the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* described: 'Mrs. Annie Elizabeth Burr, a lady who, in an unobtrusive way, assisted many who were in need of help, and was also a subscriber to various public charities, passed away on Thursday last, at her residence, 210 Ecclesall Road'. The focus on her charity work and in assisting those in need, which were both seen as honourable pursuits for women, is notable, as is her 'unobtrusive' nature at a time when being 'loud and disruptive' were

deemed to be unwomanly characteristics. In the rest of the death notice no direct mention was made to her work as a confectioner, only her connection to her father's successful business, despite the fact that the name 'Butler' in the confectionery world would have been unlikely to survive without Annie's dedication. So, although women's ownership of confectionery businesses was documented, it considerably underestimated their level of participation in the industry.

Annie died in January 1913 and was buried with her husband Frederick in the Nonconformist area of the Cemetery in plot S 17.

Company Ownership

For middle-class women during most of the nineteenth century, once they were married, any money and inherited property would be automatically forfeited to their husband. In order to legally regain the ownership of property women had to be widowed. Thus many women only entered the confectionery industry as business owners after their husband's death, as in the case of Annie Elizabeth Burr. As a result of the status and regard women had 'earned' by their marriages, women's subsequent ownership of businesses was seen as respectable.

In the 1871 Census William and Maria Brailsford were living at 257 Fulwood Road with William listed as a 'confectioner' and Maria a 'confectioner's wife'. In 1888 a job advert appeared for a 'young man, as practical Baker and Confectioner, or one having served part of time to trade - Brailsford, Confectioner, Broomhill', which suggested the business was growing and was in good health. However, aged just 46 years old, William Brailsford died on 24 March 1889. William's probate record showed he left his wife an estate worth £1,990 3s. 6d - so he had been successful in business and was financially secure. Maria Brailsford continued her husband's confectionery business after his death in 1889, also encouraging her daughter Annie into the profession. This family business continued under Maria until after the First World War. Then in 1923 the business was put up for sale. Possibly Maria had decided, at 80 years old, that it was time to retire.

Maria died in August 1924 and was buried in the Nonconformist area of the Cemetery in plot C 31.

In other instances, as we read in Sheffield Trade Directories of the time, male figureheads were often recorded as owning the company, even when their wives were actually running the business. Henri Leclere was a highly skilled silver

engraver who had moved from France in the 1850s, attracted by the metalwork industries in Sheffield, with an established business. The home of Henri and his wife Mary (née Garside) at 473 Glossop Road was a confectionery shop, first listed as a business in 1883 under Henri's name. However later directory entries and newspaper articles made clear that Mary was in fact running the shop. Henri died in 1897. The 1901 Census recorded Mary still at 481 Glossop Road, a confectioner and baker with one of her daughters, Celine, who was employed as a confectioner and baker's saleswomen.

Mary Leclere died in 1909, aged 68. The confectionery business was put up for sale: 'Confectionery, high-class, with wines and spirits licence, for immediate disposal, established and carried on for 30 years by the late Mrs. Leclere'. In a directory of 1910 Celine Leclere was recorded as a confectioner at 494 Fulwood Road and 481 Glossop Road, so although at different shops, the family business continued down the female line.

Henri, Mary, and several of their children were buried in the Anglican area of the Cemetery in plot M2 50.

Employees of A. L. Simpkin & Co. Ltd., c1934. *Source: L. Simpkin & Co. Ltd.*

The Road towards Equality

For working-class women active participation in industry was much more prevalent, as joining the labour force was often necessary for their family's survival. These women typically worked in larger companies such as Don Confectionery Co. Ltd. and Geo. Bassett & Co. Factory work at this time involved extremely long hours, and women were substantially underpaid, and so favoured by employers as they could be used as a cheap source of labour. Women could also be 'more easily induced to undergo severe bodily fatigue than men' and so were consistently exploited. Furthermore, in many workplace environments, women faced harassment, verbal abuse, and other mistreatment from male colleagues, and even their employers.

The Don Confectionery Company was founded by Samuel Meggitt Johnson (1838-1925) who was a strong supporter of women working in the confectionery industry, reportedly giving 'employment to hundreds of girls and women', that 'thoroughly enjoy their employment'. Indeed, it was a female labour force that made mass production of confectionery possible, and enabled larger firms, such as Bassett's, 'The Don', and Dixon's to succeed in the marketplace. At the same time men were commonly allocated supervisory positions while women worked on the factory floor. Even when performing identical roles, women's work was still seen as less valuable.

Lower pay for women in factory employment was challenged with the introduction of trade unions, but perhaps in unexpected ways; early demands for equal pay in 1888 made by the Women's Trade Union Council were argued, not in terms of equal rights, but because of the concern that women's lower pay made them more attractive to employers, which would eventually have a detrimental effect on men, displacing them in the labour market.

The Confectionery Trade Dispute began in 1890 at 'The Don' Works. There was speculation about the possibility of a women's strike to protect their workplace rights, with a particular focus on securing higher pay. However women were threatened with dismissal if they joined the Women's Union. Women were also not permitted to join the Gasworkers and General Labourers' Union, facing unemployment if they did so. In the wake of this upheaval, and his disapproval of unionisation, Samuel Meggitt Johnson decided to sell his shares in Don Confectionery. Unfortunately the next director of the business, Walter Appleyard, shared similar views on trade unions, and so women were forced to continue to

work with little support for their workplace rights or risk losing their jobs and their livelihoods.

Against the backdrop of political upheaval associated with women's treatment and poor pay, female suffrage was a growing movement in the 1850s. While never having had the right to vote, women were specifically barred from doing so in the 1832 Reform Act. The proportion of men able to vote increased in the 1867 Reform Act and again in 1884. By the turn of the century more than half the male population was eligible to vote, including some working-class men. However all women were still prohibited, including those who owned businesses and property and were therefore taxpayers. This stance was ostensibly justified by the belief that allowing women the right to vote would encourage them to become 'masculinised' and threaten their inherent 'emotional sensitivity' required for raising children.

But the tide was beginning to turn. In March 1890 the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* presented a detailed report of Don Confectionery's works heading 'Women's Work and Wages in Sheffield'.

> Eating sweets is a habit that is quite cosmopolitan. Old and young, rich and poor alike, are partial to 'goodies', but I think that few outsiders can have any possible conception of what a gigantic industry the confectionery trade is, what immense capital is sunk into it, and how - which is much more to the purpose of these articles - it gives healthy employment to hundreds of girls and women. I visited the massive pile of buildings situated in Bridge Street, known as Don Confectionery Works. I can truly declare that never was I more agreeably surprised, delighted, and interested than I was there. Mr. Benniston, conducted us over the works. [.....] In the warehouse, women are employed in boxing and packing by hand, from the delicious cream fondants, nestling daintily midst roses of pink paper, to the mixtures of everyday life. The females here are very neat and tidy, with hands scrupulously clean. The working hours are from 8am to 7pm, with an hour off for dinner. The lozenge department, like all the others, is not only very large, splendidly lit, and magnificently ventilated, but the absolute scrupulous cleanliness is altogether beyond praise. Every article in the manufacture of the sweets is perfectly spotless; the female employees are like their surroundings, and I can declare that I did not see one untidy or dirty girl in the place. Their hair smooth and tidy, their dresses neat, their physique unmistakably good: pretty, bright intelligent faces are the rule, not the exception. The majority of the girls are plump, they are nearly all young women and evidently thoroughly enjoy their

> employment, which seems to me to be more peculiarly suitable for my sex than any that I have seen as yet in Sheffield. The girls are busily engaged in stamping out lozenges, mostly, I observe Influenza Tablets. No possible idea can be formed of the quick dexterity of the girls, and the quantity of lozenges that one person is able to strike off is tremendous. [....] A Mess Room is built right away from the main block where a girl can leave her coat and have dinner. A girl of average intellect and capability can earn from 8s. to 10s. a week.

Born in 1824, Eliza Cooper was a political activist who campaigned for female suffrage. Her husband, Thomas Rooke, a Sheffield confectioner, whom she married in 1846, was also involved in the Chartist movement which fought for the right of all men to vote. Interestingly the first ever women's suffrage movement was established in Sheffield, and Eliza was a founding member. In 1851 the press reported members of the movement as saying, 'We have commenced an association designated "The Sheffield Women's Political Association'.' Our special object will be the entire political enfranchisement of our sex; and we conjure you, our sisters of England, to aid us in accomplishing this holy work of liberty, and fraternity.' Stemming from the strength and persistence of those early women, the Equal Franchise Act of 1928 eventually granted them the equal right to vote.

Eliza died in 1856, aged 32, and was buried in the Anglican area in plot G2 126.

* With thanks to Johnson Press plc/National World Publishing Ltd. for image usage permission.