

An example of a vintage Rowntree Easter egg

Working in a chocolate factory is as full of sweet treats as you might imagine, confirms Mrs Dales, who was employed on the production line at Rowntree in the 1950s.

“We each had our own little tin of chocolate – there was coffee, toffee mallow, orange – and if you wanted some more, you put the tin under the conveyer belt and the men at the end got your tin, put more sweets in, and pressed your bell so you knew it was coming [back along the conveyor belt].”

Her memories of Rowntree, in York – which employed thousands of locals at its confectionery manufacturing plant and housed them in its model village – have been preserved as part of the HLF-supported York Remembers Rowntree oral history project.

One of the first tests a prospective Rowntree employee had to undertake involved their hands: “They felt your hands - if your hands were cold, you went in the cream packing (department), you see, so you wouldn’t melt the chocolates,” Mrs Dales explains.

Making ‘quarter pounders’

She was just 15, and only weeks out of school, when she began work at the factory in January 1950. And almost certainly she was thrust into Easter egg production, which always began before Christmas.

The process involved taking two separate egg halves, packing one side with some cardboard bedding, filing the other side with sweets, then putting the halves together, wrapping in foil, and tying a ribbon around it.

Due to the regimented process of one girl weighing the sweets before another girl assembled the egg, Mrs Dales said she referred to the finished products as “quarter pounders”.

The weight of the sweets inside the Easter eggs isn’t the only thing that was regimented at Rowntree back then.

Single women worked on production line number one, then “when you got married you got moved off number one onto number three, to work with the other married women”. And the only jewellery workers were allowed to wear - aside from simple sleeper earrings - was a wedding ring. “If you got engaged, you couldn't wear your engagement ring,” she recalls.

Annual holidays were the last week of July and the first week of August every year, and “everybody went away, so York was empty”. Youth club – which had table tennis and snooker tables, and hosted dances - was Mondays and Fridays after work until 10pm, and workers took classes one day a week from 9am until 4pm. Mrs Dales took her classes on Wednesdays.

Gym classes meant bath time

“We used to meet other girls there, from other parts of the factory that we didn’t know; girls that worked in the gum room, or the room where they made jellies,” she reminisces. The classes included woodwork, music, cookery, as well as gym, which “is when we had a bath”.

“(At home) we had a tin bath in front of the fire, but we used to go to the gym to have a proper bath… It’s funny to think about it now, but that’s what we did.”

Listen to the full recording of Mrs Dales’ memories of working at Rowntree via the project’s Soundcloud page, and find out more about the York Remembers Rowntree project on The Rowntree Society website.



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York remembers Rowntree



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