

Working in a post war factory

This account covers my memories of factory work in the early 1950s.

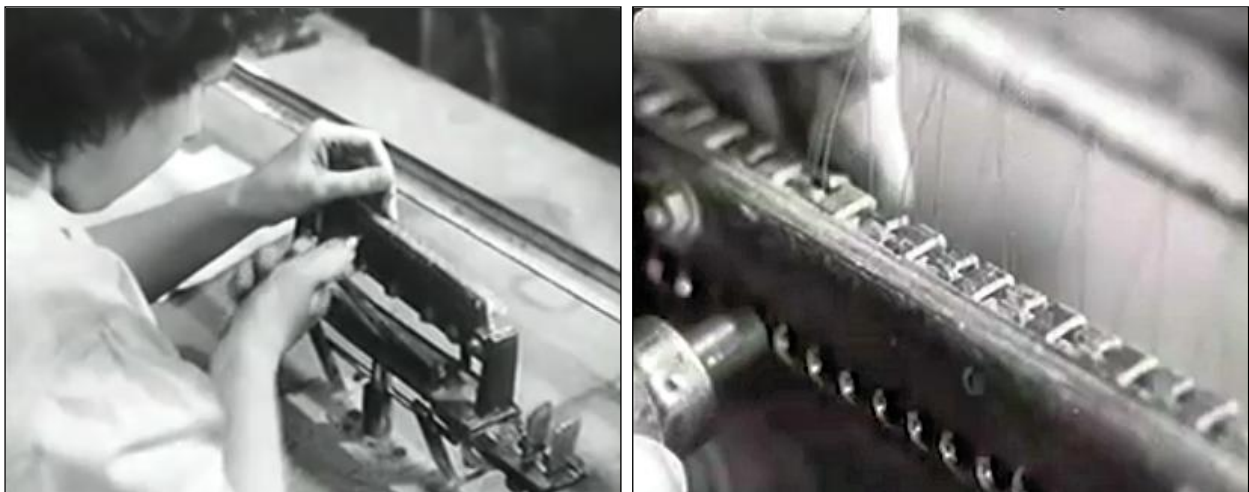
During the war I had been directed to work in a saw mill in Berkhamstead. During this era if you were not in the forces, of working age and able bodied the Government could tell you where you would work and what type of work you must do to aid the war effort.

When the war ended I left the work in the saw mill and returned to the family home in West Ewell and went to the Labour Exchange to find local work. They told me that war time regulations still applied and I was directed to work at the Mullard electronics factory in Hackbridge.

I had a 25 to 30 minute walk in all weathers to get to East Ewell Station to catch the train to Hackbridge 4 stops down the line. On arrival there was a further 10 minutes walk to get to the factory in time for the 7.30am start. We clocked in and put on an overall before going to our section of the assembly line. We finished at 5.30pm Monday to Friday and had to work Saturday mornings. We only got one holiday a year which was when the whole factory closed for just one week's summer holiday. After I had been working a number of years we got an extra day off.

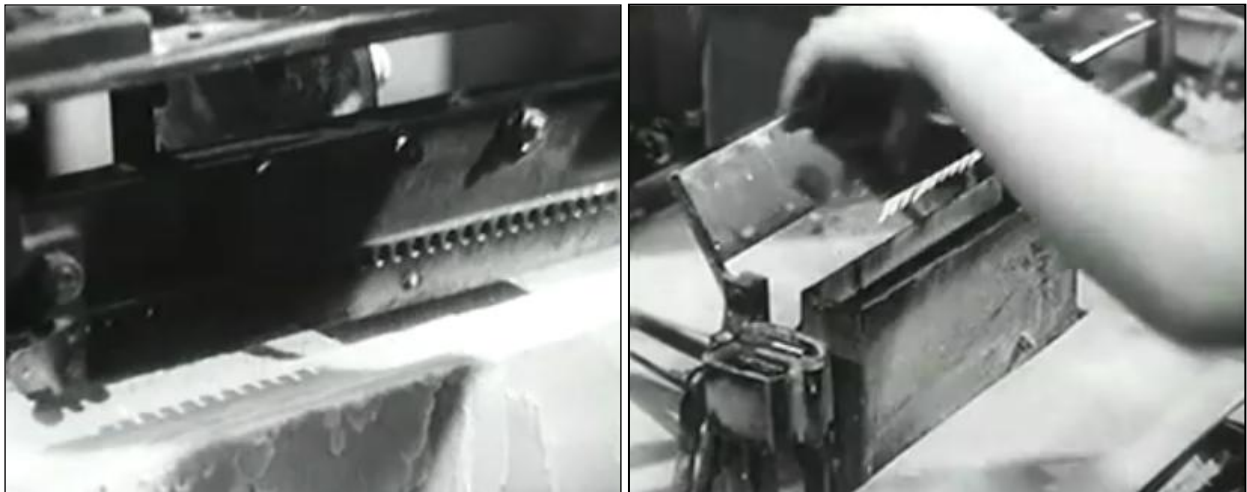
I worked at Mullards for over 12 years making components that went into electronic valves used in radios and radar. We were paid on the Beddows System which was a type of piece work where you had to make a fixed number of components before you got paid per piece. I always exceeded the required number of parts but I was never paid more than £4 10s (£4.50) a week and still feel that the Beddows system was not fair. The wages were paid late on a Friday when we all had to line up to receive a brown pay envelope and then count and sign for the money.

Most of the workers were women and I worked in a small team of 4 making heating elements. These were made from various thin and delicate metal wires, sometimes smooth wire was used and sometimes it was coiled. Whatever the type of wire used it was formed into various W type shapes which ranged in size from ½" by ½" to 1" by 1½".



These images show a typical valve assembly line - Inserting the heater wires into a rack

The work was fiddly and one team member would shape the wire and another would put it on to a small rack which held a number of separate wires. A third worker would carefully coat the wires on the full racks with a special paint. The paint had to cover the wires except for the very ends where they entered the racks. To ensure the wires were properly and evenly coated the paint was attracted to the wires by an electric current. The last member of the team would put a rack into an oven for a few minutes to bake on the paint and then using a sort of microscope check that the finished results was satisfactory. We also put tiny hooks, that looked like 1, into a rack. These were also painted and baked.



These images show a typical valve assembly line – Coating (l) and baking (r) the wires

For my job I was supposed to use tweezers to crimp the wires, but I could not get on with them and used my fingers. I was told they always waited for my wires because they had been crimped properly. I was shown some that had been done with the tweezers and they were distorted and of no use.

We never spoke to the managers, who would occasionally walk through the assembly line, but we got on well with the charge hands who looked after a number of teams. I remember the factory nurses and quality inspectors coming around but we were generally left to get on with the work. We knew that the parts we were making went into valves but never knew which ones or what they were used for.

The work was very repetitive and loud speakers played music or a radio programme while we worked. To help pass the time we would also discuss what we had done at the weekend, the latest film or a book we were reading or recite poetry. I made some good friends with the other women in my team.

Lunch was taken in a large canteen that was in a different building. You could buy a meal or take in your own sandwiches, I had sandwiches to save money. During the war entertainers would put on a short show in the canteen but after the war these became fewer and fewer but I do remember going to see Margaret Lockwood there. A tea trolley would come round mid morning and mid afternoon and we might buy a slice of bread and dripping.

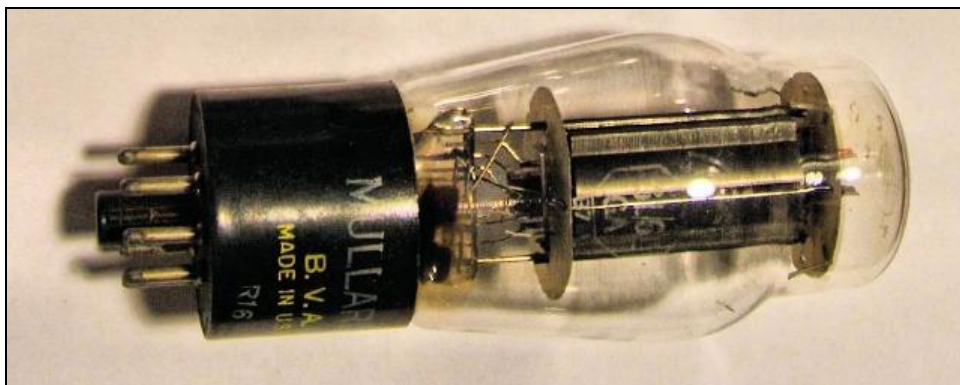
There were security guards at the factory gates and they would stop some staff each day to search their bags. What we were likely to steal I haven't a clue but after a couple of searches shortly after I started my bags were then only very occasionally searched following a random selection.



Alice (third from left) with some of her work colleagues on a works outing

About once a year a small number of teams would go on a charabanc outing, to say Margate, on a Saturday or Sunday during the summer months. This was an excuse for a pub crawl for many. My friends Dorris, Vera and I didn't drink but we never the less enjoyed the change of scene. We stopped going on these trips after the whole party was put off a train after midnight at Mitcham station following problems on the line. The other members of the party quickly went off home but neither Doris or I knew the area and were beginning to panic. I found a telephone box and an operator connected me to a taxi firm. When the driver turned up he asked why we were out so late and took pity on us only and only charged £2 in total for this early Sunday morning trip back to West Ewell.

Mrs Alice Hoblyn (aged 88) © 2011



Alice was never shown the end products that contained the parts she made. This image shows a typical valve of the type made by Mullards in the 1950s.