



# **The Chilwell Munitions Tragedy**

**a public performance  
for Beeston Town Square**

**by**

**Andy Barrett**

## CAST

### **THE STORYTELLERS:**

Lottie / Leslie / Alfred / Jane  
Newsreader 1 / Newsreader 2  
Chetwynd

**Everyone else is part of THE TROUPE (either A or B) who will take part in all of the choreographed routines. And in amongst them several other characters will emerge for short sections. These being:**

Chauffeur / Men with cases / Young Alfred / Somme soldiers / Supervisors 1 - 3 / Walter / Canary girl / Alma (a young girl) / Judge / Young Leslie / Young Willie / Evidence givers 1-3 / Bishop

**THE CHOIR - currently the Chilwell Military Wives Choir for the Saturday and the St. Mary's choir from Attenborough for the Sunday.**

**There are also specific characters who we hear on THE SOUNDTRACK; these being:**

War announcer / Job listers (various voices) / Somme soldiers x 6 / Churchill / George V

## PRE-PERFORMANCE

*There are a number of display panels around the space and around 50 green canvas chairs. The panels and the chairs and the set are used to house both photographs and textual artefacts relating to the factory, or other objects that suggest the factory and the work that was done there, and life in the locality in 1918. Some of the chairs will house MP3 players and headphones from which interviews with family members of ex-factory workers can be heard.*

*The bandstand has two stages sited on it towards the rear, one of which is Chetwynd's base. There are three microphones at the front of the bandstand and two to the areas right and left of the bandstand. Two other stages are out front for Jane and Leslie to stand on; these also have microphones. There may also be other structures built around A ladders. There are a number of key objects in the space - an old radio, a gramophone, a tin bath, a scrubbing brush with worn and yellowing bristles, a small desk with an old register. THE SOUNDTRACK plays; on a loop at this point. Possibly a selection of songs or music along with a montage of the edited interviews.*

## 1. THE PERFORMANCE IS INITIATED

*THE SOUNDTRACK now begins to play some kind of 'setting up the stage' music as THE TROUPE A and B enters the space with wheelbarrows and baskets and gathers up some of the objects. At the same time some of the chairs are re-arranged so that they become available to be sat on (THE TROUPE encouraging members of the audience to do so).*

*THE STORYTELLERS Lottie, Leslie, Alfred and Jane take their positions; as do the Newsreader 1 and 2.*

*THE SOUNDTRACK fades out.*

## 2. THE INTRODUCTION

**Lottie:** We have gathered here today to tell you a story ....

**Leslie:** A story that happened less than three miles away from this very spot ...

**Alfred:** Because of a story that happened over three hundred miles away. On what we called the Western Front.

**Jane:** It is a rather incredible story.

**Lottie:** Some of you may know it.

**Jane:** And some of you may not.

**Alfred:** And some of you may have begun to learnt of it from the information and the objects that were placed on and around these chairs that we now invite you to sit on.

**Lottie:** We all have our own story to tell; and each of our stories has, like stories do, something that sits at the very heart of it. Like a piece of old music ...

**Alfred:** A brand new bike ...

**Leslie:** The name given at a christening.

**Jane:** And a scrubbing brush hanging next to a tin bath.

**Leslie:** It's a story of how men and women from Beeston and Chilwell ...

**Jane:** ... and Ilkeston and Attenborough and Toton ...

**Lottie** ... as well as the great many who came to stay here during the years 1915 to 1918

**Alfred:** ... helped the allied forces win the First World War.

**Leslie:** Because they did.

**Lottie:** They really did.

***One of TROUPE A goes over to the Gramophone and winds it up. THE SOUNDTRACK plays a scratchy old version of Handel's The Dead March.***

**Lottie:** My name is Lottie Wiggins and I grew up here. In Beeston. My first memory is of a funeral. Of a man who fought in the Crimean War; carried on a shining gun carriage from Willoughby Street down to Beeston Cemetery. With the Beeston Silver Prize Band marching alongside playing this song, Handel's The Dead March; all the way down that long road lined with people in their Sunday best. My father standing next to me in his suit he'd got from Mr Kirchins, the local tailor for the working man. They were often out in the streets, that band. The Wakes Parade and the Flower Show on Dovecote Lane Rec when money was raised for the General Hospital ...

***TROUPE B comes forward with placards and buckets and enter into the audience ...***

**Lottie:** ... no-one realising then how important it would one day be to so many families. They played here, that band; right here when Edward the Seventh died; and when the Titanic was sunk. And even though there were these sadder moments, it was a happy life. With the fields and the river and all the shops and the societies and the churches and the new Jazz music that was becoming very popular.

***THE SOUNDTRACK – 'Ostrich Walk' by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band now fades up from underneath the Handel. THE TROUPE A begin to dance to this music.***

**Lottie:** And in those summer months, if I wasn't dancing I would go over to the camp on Hallams Lane and see the Territorials with their red jackets, striped trousers, pill box hats and canes. That's what I thought being a soldier was. That's what it looked like. Wearing a pill box hat and holding a cane. I don't think that any of us, even in our darkest dreams could ever imagine anything as awful as what was about to happen.

***The music on THE SOUNDTRACK begins to warp and bend and slow down. TROUPE A and B respond to this and all look at the radio.***

***THE SOUNDTRACK – The sound of tuning which leads into a formal BBC news announcement:*** *Owing to the summary rejection by the German Government of the request made for assurances that the neutrality of Belgium would be respected, His Majesty's Government has declared that as from 11pm on August 4th a state of war exists between Great Britain and Germany. God save The King. And God save the people of these great isles.*

**Alfred:** I was thirteen. And my father, Alfred Morley senior, was one of those that responded to Lord Kitchener's call for a hundred thousand men to go into action against the Kaiser's troops who were heading towards the French border. We'd stood here, waving them off...

***THE TROUPE A and B begin to wave. THE SOUNDTRACK – a piece of suitable music underscores the following section or alternatively THE CHOIR may sing a song.***

**Alfred:** ... singing Farewell Isobel and none of us really understanding what was happening.

**TROUPE A/B:** It'll all be over by Christmas!

**Alfred:** But it soon became clear that perhaps it would go on longer than that. A lot longer than that.

***THE TROUPE hugs and consoles each other before leaving the space.***

**Alfred:** That the Germans were better prepared than us.

### **3. THE ARRIVAL OF THE JOURNALISTS AND LORD CHETWYND**

***THE SOUNDTRACK – The sound of a typewriter now fades up over the music.***

**News 1:** Need for shells. British attack checked. Limited supply the cause.

**News 2:** For every three shells that the British troops are provided with, the Germans have one hundred.

**News 1 / 2:** It is a scandal.

**Alfred:** And that unless urgent action was taken, there was no way that we would win the war.

***And now Viscount Chetwynd strides through the space to the centre microphone.***

**News 1:** Lloyd George becomes Minister of Munitions.

**News 2:** The building of new factories to be his first priority.

**News 1:** The search for suitable men to run this most urgent of tasks begins.

**Chetwynd:** As you are aware I have no practical experience in dealing with explosives but I do feel able to say that having worked as a Deputy Sheriff in Texas; a civil engineer; a director of Vickers the machine gun and ship builders; not forgetting of course my time as a B flat clarinet player, a bronco buster and a sheep train rider

***THE SOUNDTRACK – Baaaa!***

**Alfred:** He was a colourful character.

**Chetwynd:** That with such experience I may perhaps bring the resource and ingenuity that you need for such a job. But if I am to agree I will not be bridled by red tape. I will do things my way or not at all. Agreed? Thank you.

#### **4. THE FIVE CRITERIA**

**Jane:** They say that after attending various meetings he got into his car and drove off looking for a suitable site.

***THE SOUNDTRACK – a piece of suitable driving/journey music, builds throughout this section as a member of THE TROUPE A becomes Chetwynd's chauffeur, holding a***

***steering wheel. Another stands next to him holding a hooter which is blown at the end of each of Chetwynd's statements. At the same time three pairs of two members of TROUPE A move in front of the bandstand holding large maps which they cover their faces with, revealing them for the 'check'.***

**Jane:** That he needed a location which fulfilled five criteria ...

**Chetwynd:** It must be geographically sited between the country's main shell manufacturers, and ports of embarkation.

**All:** Check.

**Chetwynd:** It must be on land with a wooded hill where loaded shells can be stored so that if an explosion occurs the blast will pass over the main factory.

**All:** Check.

**Chetwynd:** It must be close to a main railway line with room for sidings to be built.

**All:** Check.

**Chetwynd:** An adequate labour supply has to be close to hand.

**All:** Check.

**Chetwynd:** And it must be away from large centres of population, because of the dangers from high explosives.

***There is no response to this as the maps are slowly lowered to reveal anxious faces.***

**Chetwynd:** I said it must be away from large centres of population, because of the dangers from high explosives.

**All:** Check!

***The music fades out as the Chauffeur and hooter holder leave.***

**Leslie:** His diary entry of August 24<sup>th</sup> 1915 reads ...

**Chetwynd:** Started out from Nottingham on the Birmingham Road in search of site, found Chilwell and went no further.

**Leslie:** So that was it. The die was cast. And the building began. Only twenty days later. The 13<sup>th</sup> September 1915.

## 5. THE BUILDING

*TROUPE A appears carrying shovels and wheelbarrows and cross the space from side to side. TROUPE B enter onto the stages and drawplans on the blackboard. The activity should continue throughout this section.*

**Leslie:** It wasn't easy to find the materials.

**News 1:** There are five thousand tons of steel in London about to be used in the building of a hotel.

**Chetwynd:** Requisition it!

**News 1:** We'll need permission.

**All:** We'll get that later.

**News 2:** There are two triple expansion chambers packed and ready to sail to South Africa in Liverpool docks.

**Chetwynd:** Confiscate them!

**News 2:** We'll need permission.

**All:** We'll get that later.

**News 1:** There are people coming through the land as we are trying to work.

**Chetwynd:** We'll close all the roads.

**News 1:** We'll need permission.



**All:** We'll get that later.

**Leslie:** One thousand men and a platoon of soldiers to act as security. Ripping into the landscape; creating a huge machine to feed the war.

***THE SOUNDTRACK raises in volume with the following over the top: 1365 tonnes of drainpipes / 11000 tonnes of timber / 40000 tonnes of bricks / 1846 tonnes of rails / 21,800 tonnes of cement / 107500 tonnes of sand and gravel / 447 tonnes of glass / 173 tonnes of lead.***

**Leslie:** Tractors everywhere hauling bricks and sheets of corrugated iron all over the site.

***The sound of rain begins to build on THE SOUNDTRACK. THE TROUPE responds to this.***

**Jane:** It rained a lot. The mud was thick; but not as thick as that in France where so many were fighting with the second and fifth Sherwood Foresters.

**Leslie:** And inside, the machinery that Lord Chetwynd had found and requisitioned to make the munitions – the shells that were to go to France – in a new way; a more efficient way ... machines from sugar factories and coal companies ...

***The sound of rain fades out on THE SOUNDTRACK as THE TROUPE exit.***

**Chetwynd:** Imagine a flour mill; with the ingredients at the top being mixed and milled into their final constitution as gravity comes into play and they move from floor to floor. That is how we will do it. That is how we will ensure that our factory will be as efficient as possible. Ammonium nitrate and TNT combined into a new mixture, my mixture: Amatol 80/20.

**Jane:** The explosive that was to fill the shells. The shells that were to be filled by us. And fired at the Germans.

**Alfred:** If, of course, they worked.

## **6. THE ARRIVAL OF THE SHELLS**

***TROUPE A wheels on a trolley on which there are one or two shells.***

**Jane:** The test shells were driven to a town called Shoeburyness on an open Barton's lorry. And on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January 1916 they were fired. To see if they would work.

**THE SOUNDTRACK – We hear a shell being fired.**

**Jane:** To see if they would explode and shatter; scattering their shards of steel; their shrapnel, that most lethal of flying objects, through the air.

**THE SOUNDTRACK – We hear the shell exploding. This should be as loud as possible.**

**Chetwynd:** The results are reasonably superior to any other method hitherto used.

**Alfred:** And so the first men started to arrive to work the machines ...

**Lottie:** ... to fill the shells.

**Two male members of TROUPE A walk up onto the central platform each carrying a case and looking around. They shake hands over the next four lines and will then look out in awe when the shelling starts.**

**Leslie:** Just a day shift to start with, then a nightshift too.

**Jane:** Seven thousand shells a week.

**Lottie:** Which sounded a lot, and looked a lot.

**Leslie:** But it wasn't.

**THE SOUNDTRACK – An absolute barrage of noise from across the space; of shells being launched and exploding. This should last for several moments and be as loud as it can be. The men with cases shake their heads in disbelief and leave.**

**Jane:** In February 1916 the Germans attacked Verdun and launched two millions shells. On the first day. Two million.

**Alfred:** And there were rumours; locally; people saying that it was dangerous to work here whatever Lord Chetwynd said.

**Chetwynd:** I am moving into a dwelling at the end of the Press Houses. If anyone is to be blown up, I'll be the first.

**Leslie:** And so a labour battalion arrived to help increase production, which meant moving the shifts around because they were only allowed to work eight hours at a time. And the men of the South Wales Borderers, who were a part of the labour battalion, wouldn't work on a Sunday for religious reasons.

**Chetwynd:** I am not impressed at all with these men. I am afraid to say that many of them are of miserable physique and heavy drinking habits.

**Jane/Lottie:** Which was when we come into this story.

## **7. THE ARRIVAL OF THE WOMEN**

**Chetwynd:** We must employ women; that is the only answer.

*The female members of THE TROUPE now enter into the space and begin to get dressed into overalls, gloves and hats. Accompanying underscoring on THE SOUNDTRACK.*

**Jane:** The word started going round town ...

**Lottie:** They want women to fill shells over at Chilwell ...

**Jane:** ... and a lot were interested, because they had brothers and sons and husbands and sweethearts over there, and this was a way wasn't it? A way of doing our bit.

**Lottie:** My friend Polly and I walked from Lenton where we had been working at Bayley's tanners, up to Toton bend where the offices were. You had to be eighteen and I wasn't; but we got round that; you did.

**Jane:** There were no end of girls who were turned away and who then re-appeared a few days later with 'proof' that we were eighteen.

**Lottie:** And we were instructed to report for duty at six the next morning when ten of us were taken to 157 building, the filled shell store and were told that we were going to be trained to drive the cranes that were suspended high up on rails in the roof of the building. To use them to pick up the shells and to load them onto the railway wagons so they could begin their journey to France.

*Two female members of THE TROUPE climb the ladder structures that are in the space.*

**Lottie:** We had to climb a ladder to get all the way up there; and then when we had finished we had to shinny down a rope to get down. And if that wasn't frightening enough there were the shells themselves; rows and rows and rows of the things.

**Jane:** Six inch, eight inch, nine inch and the twelve inch ones which reached up over my waist. We filled them all; stretching off into the distance; neatly stacked with their nose cones pointing upwards as though they wanted to escape.#

**Lottie:** It used to just be fields and orchards where I walked with my friends. And now there was this massive factory, all two hundred acres of it camouflaged with big blotches of red, yellow and blue paint. On and on it went. As far as the eye could see.

**Leslie:** Two rows of press houses each a thousand feet long dominating the hillside into which deep tunnels had been dug.

**News 1:** The Melt Plant, covering three acres.

**Alfred:** The Empty Shell store.

**News 2:** Seven acres.

**Jane:** Which used to be called the Dirty Shell Store until those of us that worked there complained that it would affect our status within the factory.

**Lottie:** The Filled Shell Store.

**Leslie:** Nine acres.

**Alfred:** Power station.

**Jane:** Canteen.

**News 1:** General stores shed.

**News 2:** And an endless maze of offices.

**Lottie:** Showers.

**Leslie:** Medical rooms.

**Alfred:** Runways.

**Jane:** Conveyor systems.

***THE SOUNDTRACK – A sound of a steam train begins and continues under the next three exchanges.***

**Alfred:** And fifteen miles of railway line criss-crossing the ancient pathway that ran between Beeston and Long Eaton.

**Leslie:** And then the Derby men started coming. And I don't just mean the ones from Ilkeston. But those who were on Lord Derby's scheme, volunteers for services 'necessary for war'. Mainly older men; and most of them were Londoners.

**Lottie:** Can you imagine it? Like its own little city. A huge operation with a huge amount of people doing a huge amount of jobs.

***THE SOUNDTRACK crossfades to a piece of underscoring music as an atmosphere of real endeavour is now created. We should use as much of the space as possible – climbing ladders; moving trolleys across the space; carrying pallets etc.***

***THE SOUNDTRACK lists the following jobs:***

*Shell fillers / maintenance men / crane drivers / canteen workers / train drivers / shell cleaners / press workers / powder packers / laundry workers / platers / printers / boot repairers / basket makers / blacksmiths / tinsmiths / boilermen / engineers / supervisors / lab technicians / electricians / switchboard operators /*

**Lottie:** Men and women.

**Leslie:** Thousands of us.

***A boy of about 14 from THE TROUPE cycles across the space on an old Raleigh bike.***

**Alfred:** That's me look! Alfred Roper; cycling to work at the age of fourteen. I was the Wooden Hut Boy. A little building near the entrance where the workers had to leave their cigarettes and matches before going into the main building; because you couldn't take in anything

that might make a spark. Each worker's belongings went into a different, numbered compartment, for which he received a numbered disc. And on coming off duty the disc was given up in return for the contents of the pigeon hole.

**Jane:** And every one of us that worked there knew that more and more shells were needed. Because a big push was about to happen. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of July 1916.

## **8. THE SOMME**

***And now a group of soldiers march up onto the bandstand area and form a series of tableaux as THE SOUNDTRACK plays a suitable piece of accompanying music.***

**Chetwynd:** I have been told that the factory will need to work as hard as is humanly possible; to provide more shells than we have ever done before. For a very important assault.

**All:** The Somme.

**Lottie:** And we did. We worked like billy-o.

**Jane:** For five days before the attack began our troops bombarded the German lines. One and half million shells were fired. More than in the first year of the war put together.

**News 1:** Another quarter of a million shells have been fired today, the 1<sup>st</sup> of July, as the battle begins in earnest.

***THE SOUNDTRACK – There are a series of statements from soldiers that will intersperse the live dialogue. Beginning with: It was a sight to turn any man's brain.***

**News 2:** From Hampstead Heath it is possible to hear the bombardment that is taking place three hundred miles away.

***THE SOUNDTRACK – It was worse than Dante's inferno, worse than hell fire.***

**Lottie:** Just about all of the bigger shells that were fired were filled and delivered from the National Shell Filling Factory Number Six.

**Alfred:** Less than three miles away.

**THE SOUNDTRACK** – *No man's land trembled like a jelly with the explosions and the air was nothing but blue flame.*

**Leslie:** The 1<sup>st</sup> of July 1916 was the worst day in the history of the British Army.

**THE SOUNDTRACK** – *What a blood bath, what horrid images, what slaughter.*

**Jane:** 57, 470 casualties.

**Leslie:** 19,240 killed or died from their wounds.

**THE SOUNDTRACK** – *Hell cannot be this dreadful.*

**Lottie:** And the Sherwood Foresters right in the thick of it. The 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion, mainly miners; the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, the Robin Hoods, suffering eighty percent casualties.

**THE SOUNDTRACK** – *The whole of Nottinghamshire will be plunged into mourning when the casualty lists are published.*

**The soldiers disperse.**

**Lottie:** And then the letters started arriving; and you'd notice someone missing from their machine or their crane for a day before they came back in and everyone offered their condolences. And we knew; we all knew that we had to keep working, to try and get this war won; to bring this all to an end. And the supervisors of us women workers never let us forget this. Not for one single moment.

**Three female supervisors appear next to the storytellers.**

**Super 1:** A munitions worker is as important as a soldier in the trenches, on her his life depends.

**Super 2:** Anyone who limits output is a traitor to sweethearts, husbands and brothers, who are fighting. One minute lost by sixty girls equals a loss of one hour.

**Super 3:** If any worker does not like her job she should give it up, she will be of no use and probably be a bad influence.

**Alfred:** We cried together when news from the front was bad; but we joked and laughed and sang together too.

**Jane:** And we broke record after record after record.

**Leslie:** There was not a munitions factory in the land that was as productive as ours.

**News 1:** Chilwell. Thunder Valley. Where death is compounded daily, lightnings are chained, and mighty earthquakes are reduced to a chemical formula.

***THE SOUNDTRACK – A thunderclap.***

**Lottie:** By October 1916 the factory was complete. We had filled our millionth shell a month ago.

**Alfred:** Six thousand workers; two thousand of whom were women.

**Jane:** And one thousand construction workers kept on for maintenance duties.

**Leslie:** All of whom had to be fed.

**9. THE CANTEEN**

***THE SOUNDTRACK – suitable music plays as TROUPE A, wearing aprons and chefs hats now set up a canteen; asking members of the public to help put up trestle tables in the centre of the square – or again in various parts of the square – and to pull up chairs and sit down as enormous pans and bowls and spoons are brought in. And as this is happening Walter goes up to Chetwynd's space and begins:***

**Walter:** My brother asked me to take charge of the catering which I thought was unusual given that I'm a vicar, but I don't think there's a thing in his life that Godfrey has ever done which is normal. And you just don't say no to him. And of course it is vital that everyone here has two square meals during their shift. The money for these are taken from the workers' wages and although this caused an outcry at first I think that all recognise now that the food they receive is worth every penny.

To begin with I have to say that I was astonished at the amount consumed, both at breakfast and dinner. And I feared some internal sufferings would result until their digestions became



accustomed to the surfeit. But there were thankfully no gastric explosions and now it is without trepidation that I observe them all eating so heartily.

Some are of course surprised to see a man of the lord at the cattle market; but I want to make sure that we buy the best beasts. Eight bullocks and forty sheep a week; and my own team of butchers and bakers and pastry cooks. The farmers bring in lorry loads of vegetables every day; we have erected our own mineral water factory; and those in the danger buildings receive hot milk in the morning and the evening at no cost to themselves.

**Chetwynd:** You cannot underestimate the need for morale to be maintained; the need for these men and women to stay healthy in heart and soul.

***TROUPE B begins a Tug of War across the two stages.***

**Chetwynd:** Which is why I am so keen that we promote sport here in the factory. Football; men's and women's teams. And Tug of War.

**Jane:** Which I did.

***The Tug of War is won.***

**Jane:** And we always won.

***THE SOUNDTRACK – the sound of a band playing can be heard very faintly.***

**Lottie:** And then there was the lunchtime band; playing pretty tunes to make our worries fade.

**Jane:** But it didn't matter how good the food was; or how well the band played. Working with TNT is always going to be a bad job. Which is, of course, how we got our name.

## **10. THE CHILWELL CANARIES**

**News 1:** The Common Cause, the newspaper of the women's suffragette movement 29<sup>th</sup> September 1916.

**News 2:** The workers in the danger buildings look terrible ...

***The canary girl climbs up onto a platform in the space as a bath is brought over for her to stand in.***

**News 1:** The girls' skin turns yellow and their hair becomes practically green.

***TROUPE B covers the canary girl with yellow make up.***

**Jane:** You'd get horrible rashes; your face would swell up so that you became almost blind for a day or two. You looked repulsive.

***One of TROUPE B goes to collect the scrubbing brush for the canary girl.***

**Jane:** To start with you'd wash and wash and scrub and scrub but then you realised. That it doesn't come off. My brush that hung by my tin bath had hardly any bristles left. Probably rotted from the poison in my skin. It became the trade mark of us shell fillers and we soon got given a name, our very own, which we wore as a badge of honour. The Chilwell Canaries.

**Lottie:** But going a bit yellow wasn't the only thing they, or any of us, had to worry about.

***THE SOUNDTRACK – The sound of an alarm going off.***

## **11. THE ZEPPELIN RAID**

***TROUPE B pack up the bath and brush and leave the space as Alma, a girl of about ten, has taken over the microphone from one of the storytellers.***

**Alma:** I live at Orchard Cottage; my father Albert Hall is the Chief Engineer of the Factory. And one night I was woken up by my mother and brother and taken to the fields where we were laid under a hedge to wait for the zeppelin which was going up and down the Trent looking for the factory. It was beautiful really, a large silver cigar gliding along. But it wanted to drop a bomb on top of my father's factory. And you can imagine what would have happened then.

**Alfred:** They never found it. And a rumour spread the next day. That Lord Chetwynd had caught three German spies trying to signal to it with lights and had them shot out of hand.

***THE SOUNDTRACK – Three shots***

**Chetwynd:** Nonsense of course. But I set up a policeman as sentry all day over an empty room; and at night had three graves dug on the hillside, filled them with stones and had a black post put at the head of each.

## **12. THE TOILET TICKETS / CDQ / LOCAL COURT**

**Lottie:** Then there were the toilet tickets. Only for the female workers mind.

***TROUPE A circulates and gives the female members of the audience a ticket.***

**Chetwynd:** I have found that a certain percentage of the women, not a large one, spend a very considerable amount of their working time in the latrines gossiping.

**Lottie:** If the tickets weren't used a bonus was paid. So cross your legs ladies and think of the extra mutton you can put on the table!

**Chetwynd:** You should also be aware that I have put in an elaborate system of shower baths in the changing rooms and that every man and woman can use them as often as they like with one bath a week being compulsory. We also have a small hospital and I myself have made a preparation of my own to be prescribed where necessary. I call it CDQ.

**All:** Cure Damned Quick!

**Alfred:** And of course if anyone was found with contraband, bringing things into the factory which they shouldn't, then the punishment was very strict. You only have to look at the records for the local courts.

***A Judge has entered onto the central platform as the three supervisors come forward.***

**Super 1:** Caught smoking. Prison.

**Super 2:** Having tobacco in your possession. Prison.

**Super 3:** Having matches in your possession. Prison.

**Lottie:** We couldn't take in anything that was metal. No hair grips. Absolutely nothing. We were stripped naked on our way in. But it had to be like that; didn't it? I mean we were sitting on an absolute powder keg. Huge quantities of TNT. But we never really thought about it. It was our

men over there who were in danger. All we were doing was giving them the tools for the job so they could kill as many Germans as they could as the war dragged on throughout 1916 and through the next year and on and on and on it went until you never believed it would be over.

### **13. THE EXPLOSION**

**Leslie:** I had started in August 1917. My dad worked there as a timekeeper and heard there was a vacancy for an office boy in the Staff Superintendent's Office. I wasn't quite thirteen when I began ...

***One of TROUPE B goes up to the desk and register; a boy of around fourteen who is Leslie.***

**Leslie:** ... entering the names and departmental references in strict order of the men employed. The female records were kept by lady members in the office. I used to deliver documents too; and went to Lord Chetwynd's Office on a regular basis. He had a clicker there which recorded every time a shell was filled. Most of those who came for jobs, the men, had been discharged by the army on medical grounds, but nothing which prevented doing their jobs here. A new chap had come in from Stapleford that morning, July 1<sup>st</sup>, and I'd questioned his name because he said he was Willie Johnson Ablard ...

***And now an older man wearing a cap from TROUPE B enters as Willie. They act out the rest of Leslie's account in a dumbshow.***

**Leslie:** ... and I said 'do you mean William Johnson Ablard, because I have to get it right, I have to write down the name you were christened with' and he said 'no, that's right, I was christened Willie'. And so I wrote it down, 'Willie Johnson Ablard' and he was passed by the MO and told to start work that same day; the night shift, at six o'clock; in the TNT mill.

***The two members of TROUPE B leave as on THE SOUNDTRACK a terrible underscoring sound begins to build up. TROUPE A AND B now come into the space carrying stretchers on which there are labels with the names of those that were killed. They put these names onto the set. As this happens – and it will take some time – the narrative continues:***

**Jane:** You couldn't believe the heat that day. You tried to get some sleep if you were working nights; always difficult in the summer when you wanted to be out walking the dog by the river. And that day there was no chance; the heat was terrible. When I clocked on I was told that ice had been brought in all day to keep the TNT cool.

**Alfred:** I had gone to the hut as normal, the nightshift; six o'clock. The day had been an absolute belter and it was still hot that evening, so hot that I opened the hut door, sat down on the step and had a few words with the local bobby who was just coming past. I didn't know his name; but he was PC22.

**Leslie:** I had clocked off, after adding Willie's name to the records and headed over to Beeston Church for choir practice.

**Lottie:** When I got home not too long after six - you always got a move on however tired you were, to get as much of the day as you could - I found that my sister Emily had gone to the dentist and had left a meal for me. I ate it, and then began to wash the dishes, the window wide open ...

***THE SOUNDTRACK – something like a huge inrush of breath.***

**All:** The clock stopped at ten past seven in the evening.

**Alfred:** And just as he left, PC22, there was an enormous explosion ...

**Leslie:** This most paralysing bang that ripped through the air ...

**Jane:** ... you've never heard anything like it.

**Leslie:** And the church shook, it did, it shook.

**Lottie:** Everything shook.

**Alfred:** And I was knocked unconscious by this force which hit me even before the sound did.

**Lottie:** And everything moved; the whole house moved; a huge mushroom spiral of smoke and debris rising to the sky.

**Leslie:** And we all rushed out ...

**Lottie:** And I ran out of the house ...

**Leslie:** And all along the road you could see that there wasn't a window that hadn't been blown in or blown out.

**Jane:** I may have been thrown to the floor, as the roof fell in. A steam pipe may have fractured and filled the building with steam and thick fog. There may have been the most terrible noises as steam sprayed on the bodies of injured men.

**Alfred:** And when I came to the hut was gone. And the bobby, PC22, had been killed by a telegraph pole which had fallen on him.

**Jane:** The cables hanging and spinning and tangling up in all the wreckage with the electricity spitting out of them.

**Alfred:** There was this huge sheet of flame coming from the press house and the fire engines and ambulances that belonged to the factory were all smashed to pieces.

**Leslie:** And I just thought about that man, Willie, not William, who had started that night and if he had been hurt.

**Alfred:** My eyes were damaged; I'd been cut by flying glass ...

**Leslie:** And he had, he was right there in the middle of it and didn't stand a chance.

**Lottie:** I was shouting for my sister ...

**Jane:** There were bodies everywhere, black with burns, some dying, and lots dead.

**Alfred:** Every single match and every single cigarette in that little hut, that pile of rubble, had been fired by the blast. Every cigarette case was filled with ash.

**Lottie:** And she was coming back towards the house, with my other sister and brother and my father.

**Jane:** People with stretchers clambered through the dust and the wreckage. A fireman was trapped under steel girders; men and doctors tunnelling through unable to move him and pushing a rubber pipe through to feed him with liquid and keep him alive.

**Lottie:** And like everyone else we made our way towards the High Road.

**Alfred:** I stumbled through the rubble towards the factory hospital, unable to see, with my arms stuck out in front of me in case there were fallen branches from the trees that lined the road.

**Lottie:** And we all wished we hadn't. Because it was the most awful thing to see. Men and women with their clothing burnt off; with black and charred faces; some bleeding; some with limbs torn off and eyes and hair gone.

**Alfred:** My eyes were bandaged and a young man took me on the crossbar of his bike to the college hospital at Long Eaton.

**Leslie:** A never ending procession of vans and cars and carts and lorries carrying the injured to the Nottingham General Hospital.

**Lottie:** Doctors, nurses and volunteers of every description rushed to the factory, not knowing if there would be another explosion; to ferry away the injured; to help those who were trapped; to do whatever they could.

**Jane:** A huge pall of greenish black smoke drifting off into the distance; a fog blotting out the evening sunlight like an eclipse.

**Leslie:** Everywhere you looked there were houses with no windows and everything was covered with this greenish grey ash, like the streets had been uninhabited for centuries.

**Lottie:** It's just luck isn't it? Whether you were you were on shift or at home. There were some that should have been there but swapped shifts; others who were sick that night. I just wasn't due in. I was A shift. Not B shift. Not the shift that were there, in the factory when it happened.

**Jane:** I do not know what happened. I did not survive. The brush that hung alongside my tin bath would never be used again.

**Leslie:** And I had to write on his record card, on Willie Johnson Ablard's record card; the man who had started work at six o'clock that night; 'killed in explosion – 1<sup>st</sup> July 1918'. Along with all the others. 139 in all.

**Jane:** Only thirty two of us who were killed that evening could be identified.

***The names have all been laid out. There is a silence. The performers stand still and do absolutely nothing for thirty seconds. This silence is broken by THE SOUNDTRACK – the sound of a bell.***

#### **14. POST EXPLOSION**

***THE TROUPE now moves into a flurry of activity again as THE SOUNDTRACK plays a suitable piece of music.***

**Leslie:** The repair work started immediately. By the time the day shift started at 6am some work had already resumed in the Shell Stores and the Melt House.

**Alfred:** There must have been 30 or 40 tons of twisted and mangled metal lying around but it was the coffins on the pavement that hit me. Dozens and dozens of them piled up on top of each other. I cried my eyes out.

**Leslie:** And we wondered if people might not turn up; now that the real danger of what they were doing had been made so terribly clear. But they did. They all did.

**Lottie:** The platform at Attenborough Station was just as crowded as ever when the shift change came around. Half heading east, half heading west.

**Alfred:** I told the office that I would have trouble getting to work without a bike and a week later a brand new one was delivered to my house with a delivery note stamped 'bill paid' ...

***The boy from THE TROUPE that we saw cycling through the space does do again.***

**Alfred:** And I got on it and pedalled to work and a new hut had already been built for me. Just like the rest of factory was being rebuilt.

**Leslie:** The funny thing was that none of us seemed to fear that there might be another explosion.

**Lottie:** There were rumours that it was sabotage.

**News 1:** Enemy agents.

**News 2:** Irish sympathisers.



**News 1:** Disaffected workers.

**Alfred:** And some were asked for their views by visiting officials as a secret report was carried out.

**Members of THE TROUPE come up onto the central stage:**

- I consider the mixers have been strained through overloading.
- I think it is quite possible a hot bearing could be the cause of the explosion.
- My experience teaches me that high explosive matter can be completely detonated by a quantity of it raised as dust and intimately mixed with the atmosphere and fired by a spark.

**Lottie:** Of course they couldn't write about in in the papers.

**News 1:** Sixty feared dead in Midlands's factory explosion.

**Lottie:** But the telegrams that arrived made sure that we knew that the outside world was thinking of us.

**One of THE TROUPE comes forward to tune the radio.**

**News 2:** The Minister of Munitions. Mr Winston Churchill.

**THE SOUNDTRACK – In the voice of Churchill!** *Please accept my sincere sympathy with you all in the misfortune that has overtaken your fine Factory and in the loss of valuable lives. Those who have perished have died at their stations on the field of duty and those who have lost their dear ones should fortify themselves with this thought; the courage and spirit shown by all concerned, both men and women, commend our admiration, and the decision to which you have all come to carry on without a break is worthy of the spirit which animates our soldiers in the field. I trust the injured are receiving every care.*

**Leslie:** And even the king himself; who had visited the factory before I started there and had said that it was one of the most wonderful sights he had ever seen.

**THE SOUNDTRACK – In the voice of George V!** *The King is shocked to hear of the explosion at your Factory and deeply deplores the loss of so many valuable lives. His Majesty offers his*

*heartfelt condolence with those who are in sorrow and with the injured. I am to express the King's sympathy with you and your staff who have had so much at heart the welfare and safety of those under your care. It is with feelings of admiration that his Majesty has heard of the gallantry displayed on all sides and of the prompt resumption of work this morning.*

**Chetwynd:** Please convey to His Majesty the King the heartfelt thanks of all at Chilwell for his gracious telegram. Kindly present my humble duty with the assurance that the one thought of all here is to maintain the supply of ammunition to the army.

***THE SOUNDTRACK – as at the top of the performance we hear a scratchy old version of Handel's The Dead March; as though being played on a Gramophone. This time it may be accompanied by some quotes from the register of deaths as THE TROUPE stands in front of the Bandstand.***

**Lottie:** I was one of those chosen to represent A shift of the Filling Store for the funeral service at Attenborough Church. And just like all those years ago there was a huge cavalcade walking down the road with the works band playing Handel's The Dead March.

## **15. CARRYING ON**

**Leslie:** And so we carried on.

**Alfred:** We kept making shells in Chilwell.

**Leslie:** And they kept firing shells in France.

**Alfred:** As the insanity and slaughter continued.

**Jane:** The V.C factory; that's what they called it; because of the bravery shown by everyone who worked there.

**Lottie:** In mid-September we recorded our highest ever weekly figures for shell filling even though the rebuilding wasn't finished.

**Alfred:** There were seven munitions factories in the country. And yet over 60% of wartime production came from ours. National Shell Filling Factory No. 6.

**Lottie:** Nineteen million shells.

**Leslie:** And then at precisely eleven o'clock on the morning of the 11<sup>th</sup> of November we were told to assemble on the lawn and the band were all there on the bandstand in their uniforms. And their instruments were as bright as could be ...

**Chetwynd:** There was not one push at this factory that you did not meet even when what you were being asked to do seemed almost impossible. I will never forget the day I went round the Press Houses to find that you had begun work half an hour early and that you were going to take half an hour off of your breakfast break. And that you were all singing.

**Alfred:** The notices were short and to the point.

**Leslie:** Please note your services will not be required in this Factory after 28<sup>th</sup> December.

**Jane:** And on the 15<sup>th</sup> of November they met one last time, together for a thanksgiving service at the factory ...

***THE TROUPE move up onto the Bandstand.***

**Alfred:** For those who had died just as much for their country as those who had died at the front.

**Leslie:** On that terrible date. The 1<sup>st</sup> of July 1918. The worst day in the history of this town; and all those towns and villages nearby.

**Lottie:** And the Bishop of Southwell spoke to us all, in his fine purple robes.

**Bishop:** Some months ago when I passed through this great factory I thought 'isn't it a pathetic thing to see men and women engaged at work on things which are being made for destruction. When will the day come when those hands shall be turned to work of construction? That day has now come. I believe many of you will regret going from this place. You have learned the spirit of Brotherhood here ...

**Lottie:** And sisterhood! I thought that; but I didn't say it.

**Bishop:** ... but we want you to go now to that new work, whatever it may be. And so this service is a farewell and we hope and pray that those who have done so well here will be able to find good homes and good work wherever they may be.

***THE TROUPE shakes hands with each other and disperses in all directions.***

**Alfred:** And that was that.

**Lottie:** A week after the armistice it was announced that the Chilwell VC Factory was to be made into a permanent military facility. I left to become a machinist in the making up trade. Cox and Sons. Neck wear and tea aprons. I was twenty years old. The last time I stepped foot in the factory was that December when it was opened to the public and one last meal was put on. Roast beef. Available without coupons. And we all poured in in our thousands; arriving by car, by bike, by trap and a special train that was laid on.

**Leslie:** I stayed there, at the factory, as it became a military storage depot for all of the various bits of equipment that were coming back from France.

**Alfred:** I went into action in the following war and was released, disabled in 1945 and then worked for the local council.

**Jane:** And my name can be found on the memorial on what is now the Chetwynd Barracks; still a military site after all these years.

**Leslie:** The Depot; that's what people round her called it as it became full to the brim over the next few years. It was strange being there. The floor of the Melt House was still stained yellow by TNT three years later; but now it was home to thousands of rusting bicycles. The laboratory was a gigantic museum of watches and clocks. There was enough barbed wire to fence the whole of England and the Press Houses were stacked high with bales of pyjamas and horseshoes, as numberless as the stars. There was no chatter ...

**Alfred:** ... no singing.

**Leslie:** ... no lunch time bands.

**Jane:** ... no tug of war.

**News 1:** ... no shells.

**News 2:** ...no record breaking.

**Lottie:** ... no canary girls or Derby men, or those with letters saying their loved ones had been killed at the front. It was over. Thank the Lord it was all over.

***THE CHOIR sing 'Oh God Our Help In Ages Past' as the cast exit.***