

# The Stowmarket factory that caused 'outrage' with its working conditions

If you've been keeping up with the news, you'll have seen all about the strike action that's taking place up and down the country.

Train drivers, nurses, teachers and more are all taking to the picket line to improve working conditions and pay across a variety of sectors.

A staunch leftist through and through, I was keen to find out more about Suffolk's history of striking over the years. So I made my way to The Hold to do some research and paw through the county's archives and this is when I came across the Stowmarket strikes which took place in the summer of 1913. This period of industrial action occurred when the workers at the Stowmarket Explosives Company took to the streets in order to fight for fairer wages.

Harry Double, writing in the East Anglian Daily Times on January 2, 1985, said: "When the year 1913 dawned, no one in the town realised it was to be a year which would see itself embroiled in one of the longest ever industrial disputes experienced in East Anglia.

"This comparatively sleepy and peaceful backwater, with its population of 4,000, was to experience dramatic events which were destined to reach the House of Commons."

He goes on to write that the Stowmarket Explosives Company was 'notorious' for its low wage scale, and discontent within its workforce had been festering for some months, with various factions from within its midst accusing the firm of paying breadline wages for some considerable time.

The catalyst for striking came when it was discovered that, while the basic rate for unskilled workers had been officially raised from three pence a penny to fourpence per hour, the company was not paying it.

"It was the straw that broke the camel's back and the men had downed tools."

On Wednesday, January 28, 1913, according to records, just before 9am, a carpenter returning to work after breakfast was stopped by one of his colleagues who said: "Tain't no use going to work this morning, Shaver. The strike's on and the boys won't let you in!" to which he replied: "We'll see about that!"

Shaver rolled up his sleeves, spat on his hands, and added: "I'd like to see who the dave's goin' to stop me."

Five hundred workers normally present at the factory refused to return, forming picket lines outside the factory. Throughout the day, they accosted

those who left and entered. Tensions ran so high that the remaining 100 workers were forced to stop.

And these boys meant business. They had formed a strike committee, opened committee rooms in town, and an official strike leaflet was issued which read: 'Down With Sweaters!'. The leaflet also pointed out that while the minimum wage paid to Stowmarket workers was 15 shillings and 11 pence, workers elsewhere were being paid 23 shillings (and even up to 26 shillings in some instances).

"The standard of living of the working classes in rural Stowmarket prior to World War One was low indeed, and there was little chance of saving up for a rainy day. Consequently, the effects of the strike started to bite quickly."

Thankfully, the people of Stowmarket were on the strikers' side.

The landlady of a local hotel offered to supply daily soup for 16 of the neediest families, a grocery gave them 100 tickets for free tea, and one Stowmarket resident sent a large quantity of jam to the committee rooms. The Co-Operative Society donated a lump sum of £20 to the strikers, and a further £5 a week for the duration of the strike.

Collection boxes were placed in local pubs, and street collections were organised, with additional appeals made at flower shows and fêtes (and the town's Debating Society even held a concert and raised £7 for the strikers).

Over in the nearby village of Combs, eight collectors organised weekly whip-rounds for the men, and a novelist who was involved in the Suffragette's movement gave £5. In addition, a number of local MPs chipped in, raising £60 in total. Liberal MP for Stowmarket, Grank Goldsmith, took an interest in the strikes, and met with the workers, promising he would mediate for them in London.

Goldsmith regularly met with Duff Grant, the company's general manager at the city office. However, he was told the men's requests would only be met on their unconditional return to work.

The strikers, of course refused, and stood their ground until their demands were met.

They continued to meet every week on the Dukes Head Meadow on Ipswich Street, and march through town with bands and union banners.

"In the following week there was correspondence in the local press, and in this Duff Grant asserted that the figure of fifteen shillings and eleven pence quoted by the union was the lowest in the scale of wages, and that the average weekly wage paid by the

firm had been considerably more," explains Harry.

"He accepted the fact that there had been a general advance in the standard of local wage and that it was now approximately fourpence an hour. He also stated that the company had no intention of paying less, but he wanted that come the end of the strike, there would not be the same number available."

Contracts were lost, and essentially only 350 of the 500 workers would be required going forwards. The strikers were also told if they didn't return to work, the company would shut down completely. This news soon spread, and many of the workers (who were living near or below the breadline) went back to work. It didn't take long for the local union rep to get wind of this however, and a picket line of strikers gathered at the factory. Tensions rose as they blocked the road, preventing workers going into the factory, despite the efforts of police intervention.

As workers intent on not striking carried on working, they managed to find their way back into the factory, and resorted to staying there while supplies were smuggled into them.

But the strikers did anything they could to thwart their efforts to continue working, and even intercepted one of the food supply carts.

On Tuesday July 29, the Explosive Company suddenly issued a revised schedule of wages. Crowds of strikers soon met at the committee rooms, where they eventually found out that the new terms wouldn't apply to everyone with some workers seeing no pay increase at all. "In the case of the boys, payment was to be reduced by a halfpenny per hour.

"At a further meeting called by Alderman Wade, it was agreed that all those belonging to the departments in which an advance of wages had been notified should seek to return to work next day, and that those who were unlikely to get any advance should remain out."

The following morning, the workers took to the streets of Stowmarket at dawn, and made their way towards the factory gates.

"But sadly, in the course of the next week, the original payroll of 500, only 170 men were given jobs. This slow intake was typical of the weeks that followed. It was a hollow victory indeed. Agreed increases were not paid until two or three weeks had elapsed after the return of each individual worker, and many of the company's original workforce were not re-instated.



Striking workers at the Stowmarket Explosives Works in 1913



"The privations and hardships sustained by countless Stowmarket families left their scars for months afterwards. The town had experienced 70 days of strife and bitterness and a period of deprivation which was to be

long remembered."

Do you have any Suffolk strike stories from years gone by? Get in touch with danielle.lett@newsquest.co.uk to share your photos and experiences.