

I WAS THERE...

Working for the

# BEAUTY IS YOUR DUTY

wartime campaign

**Joan Osborne,** 93, worked for Yardley, the iconic brand that helped to boost the nation's morale in the Second World War. Here she remembers life in Britain's biggest beauty factory

'During the Second World War, Churchill told us, "Beauty is your duty!" and war-weary women everywhere reached for their treasured lipsticks and put their best face forward,' recalls Joan Osborne with a nostalgic smile. 'I was proud to be a part of the campaign to encourage women to embrace their femininity, despite the gruelling hardships we all faced.'

Joan is 93 now and leads a quiet life from her bungalow in Hullbridge, Essex, but aged 15 she was living in East London, where she landed her first job at the world-famous cosmetics company, Yardley.

'I started there in 1942. My dad didn't want me going into a factory, he wanted me in an office, but the lure of Yardley was too much. It must have been the glamour,' she laughs. 'I remember travelling past the factory on the bus and the conductor opening the window so that everyone could smell the lavender blowing.'

Yardley's elegant showrooms were in Bond Street, but its lipsticks, soaps and fragrances were produced in the heartland of the noxious goods

industry in East London. Everything from paint to acid was produced in Stratford. Unsurprisingly, image-conscious young women all clamoured to work for Yardley and it was a huge employer of local girls, who were known locally as the 'Lavender Girls'.

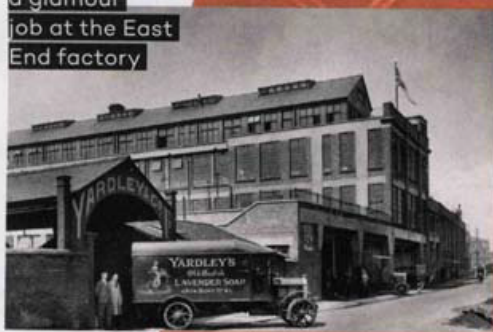
'The factory was situated down Carpenters Road, or Stink Bomb Alley as we called it because it was famous for its smells. Seven different types of air flowed down there, depending on which way the wind was blowing. I can still smell the lavender,' Joan says.

She was immediately sent to work in the top floor perfumery department, where



#### PERFECT POUT

Young women clamoured for a glamour job at the East End factory





she was given a broom. 'I thought, "What a cheek! I haven't come here to sweep floors". So, they moved me to bottle-filling, where I was putting the skins [labels] and caps on the bottles. They were losing so many girls to the services I don't think they wanted to lose any more, so they kept me sweet. I started at 7.45am, earned 18 shillings a week and my clocking-in number was 157. I've still got the card.

'They were dangerous times, especially when the flying bombs started up. Sometimes people would go home and you'd never see them again. My supervisor, a nice lady who used to check our work, went home one night, let herself in and a rocket dropped on her house and killed her.

'Being young I didn't think much about the danger. I was more upset by how cold it was in the factory; the heating was rarely on and we were always freezing. They used to give us cups of Oxo to warm us up. At least the room always smelt lovely from the lavender, freesia and April violets perfume.'

Joan's life was lived out against cataclysmic world events: the terrible waiting for D-Day, followed by the remorseless raining down of Hitler's revenge weapons (the V1 Doodlebug and the faster long-range V2). But for a young girl like Joan, it was the small joys of life that stand out in her memory rather than the shadow under which they lived.

'As East End girls we were

**'My dad didn't want me going into a factory, but the lure of Yardley was too much. It must have been the glamour'**

obsessed with glamour. I never went down the shops without my make-up on,' she laughs. 'Once a month there was a staff sale and I used to queue for my lavender soap, talc and lipstick. The girls were all so friendly, there was never any rivalry. It was a badge of honour to look your best. We were aware we were the Lavender Girls, and people looked to us to be well turned out.

'We all did our hair nice. I used to go to bed with my dinky curlers in and do my face with Yardley's Pan Cake make-up. We all took such pride in our appearance and loved to sing along to *Music While You Work* in the factory.'

Glamour was the watchword of those times and nowhere



**KEEP GLAM AND CARRY ON**

Joan (left) won the prize of a makeover at the Bond Street showrooms (above). A call to arms (and face) stressed 'masculine efficiency' (far left). Selecting fragrances (below) and the distilling room





♦♦ was it more resonant than in that part of London. There was a genuine fear that if women lost their femininity and were seen looking a little scruffy it would lead to a collapse in morale which would be detrimental to society. Care over one's appearance took on extra potency.

Yardley, Britain's oldest cosmetics firm, rose to the challenge, telling its customers, 'Good looks and morale go hand in hand', and *Vogue* told its readers that 'a woman past caring is a woman past repairing'.

These powerful messages were underpinned with a sophisticated, pseudo military marketing campaign of cosmetics, which saw the weaponisation of lipstick. 'There were shades called Auxiliary Red, Victory Red and Home Front Ammunition,' recalls Joan. 'There was even a shade called Burnt Sugar, said to go perfectly with khaki.' Red lips became the potent symbol of glamour and defiance. It was rumoured, too, that Hitler hated women with red lips, which provided one more reason to wear it.

'Yardley would reward workers who kept a tidy conveyor belt with a free makeover at its Bond Street Beauty School,' says Joan. 'I was tickled pink to be sent up there, and I came back looking lovely. What a treat in wartime. I was 18 when the war finished and all us Lavender Girls were proud to have worked at the Yardley factory.'

After the war, Joan's beauty drew the eye of an admirer. 'I met Reggie at the wedding in 1948 of one of the Lavender Girls I had worked with. He'd just been demobbed. His sister Ivy was my chargehand in perfumery.'

'Reggie had had a rough time during the war. I know he crossed the Rhine, but he didn't ever talk to me about it. All my brothers came home from the war, so I was lucky, but I did learn that when a man goes into the army, he doesn't come home the same person.'

Joan and Reggie did their courting at the picture palaces of East London before marrying in 1953. 'Money was tight, so I wore my big sister Millie's wedding dress,' she says. 'She'd worked in perfumery, too, and we were very

#### SCENTS OF PURPOSE

Joan started at the factory at the age of 15, earning 18 shillings a week attaching labels and caps to perfume bottles



close. Millie was a beautiful woman and very popular in the perfume department. I remember when she won a competition to name a Yardley lipstick. She was so proud, and her lipstick, Gypsy Rose, was a beautiful pink. Sadly, she died many years ago, aged 55, of breast cancer.'

Joan was devastated by the loss of her lovely big sister and missed her as much as she missed the camaraderie of the days in the factory. 'After

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I started having children in 1955, I left Yardley. Being at home on your own with children was hard. You missed being part of a big group of women.'

Like so many other firms, Yardley moved out of East London to the burgeoning suburbs of Essex. In 1966, the company opened a new modern factory, and so ended a way of life in Stratford. Today, the original Yardley factory is no longer there, buried beneath the sprawling Olympic Park and a landslide of gentrification. 'Occasionally I used to pass it on the bus and feel a pang as I smelt the lavender,' says Joan. 'But it's all gone now.'

Sixty-five years on, she still treasures those memories: 'I'm only an ordinary working girl, but the years I worked at Yardley made my life. It taught me the value of hard work and how to manage in the war years. I met lifelong friends and my husband through Yardley. It gave me everything I could wish for. Reggie died 30 years ago, but I still have my memories and two lovely sons who are very proud that their mum was a Lavender Girl.'

*Secrets of the Lavender Girls*, a novel by Kate Thompson (£6.99, Hodder & Stoughton), is out now