

West Lothian at work



The Twentieth Century

The twentieth century saw a dramatic change in work in West Lothian. In 1900 the major employers were heavy industry, especially oil shale mining and processing. Many others worked in brickworks, foundries, and agriculture. As the shale reserves were exhausted, the shale industry started to disappear. The last mine closed in 1962.



Stacking fireclay pipes in the kiln at Bathville Pipeworks, Armadale. The fireclay seams in central Scotland were used to make bricks, pipes, chimney cans and sanitary ware. Both men and women were employed in the fireclay industry.

The general decline of traditional industries in Scotland after the Second World War had a major effect on West Lothian. Demand fell for coal and firebricks, and this led to widespread unemployment.

The creation of the new town of Livingston brought hope of economic recovery. Livingston was to attract new industries and bring jobs for local people.

As Livingston grew, new industries did arrive. For the first time women in West Lothian took almost as many jobs as men.



Candle production at Broxburn Oil Works. At its peak in 1912 the shale oil industry employed 12,000 people, almost all in West Lothian.

Livingston's success did not help the surrounding towns like Armadale, which continued to lose traditional jobs.

Some new industries brought renewed hope, such as the arrival of Levi's Jeans in Whitburn in 1969, and Motorola in Bathgate in 1991.

However, the recession of the 1970s and early 1980s finally killed off the West Lothian coal mines.

At the close of the century a few traditional works still survived, including a steel foundry and brickworks.

More and more people were employed in the service industries, like retailing and call centres, or in the public sector.



Aerial View of the Atlas Steel Foundry in Armadale. This works closed in 1990, although another foundry in Bathgate survived until 2008.



Local shops like this one employed thousands of men and women. By the 1960s supermarkets were beginning to take over. Small grocers shops are now a rare sight in our high streets.

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Capturing Echoes of the Past

This exhibition is part of a joint project between West Lothian Council's Museums and the Armadale Employability Group. The project explores the working lives of the people of West Lothian through photography and oral history.

The images and interviews are the product of the hard work of the participants in the Helping Young People to Engage (HYPE) project.

This small group of 16-18 year olds are not currently in work or education. They worked with photographer Lisa Fleming to develop and hone their digital photography skills.

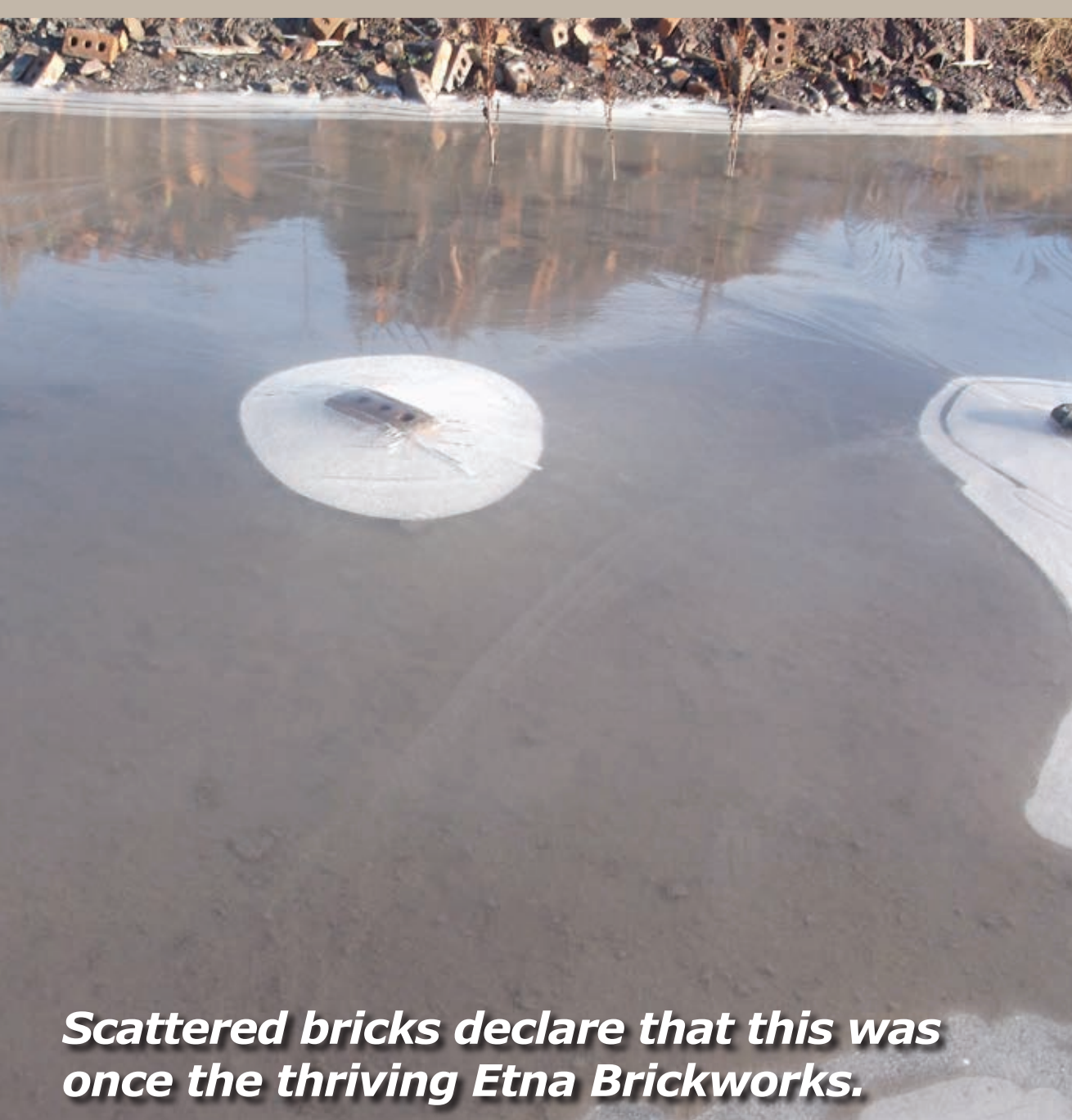
The group also benefitted from a stimulating oral history training session delivered by the Living Memory Association.

The young people interviewed some local people about their experiences of working lives from the 1960s through to present day.

They were also encouraged to talk to their own families about experiences of work.



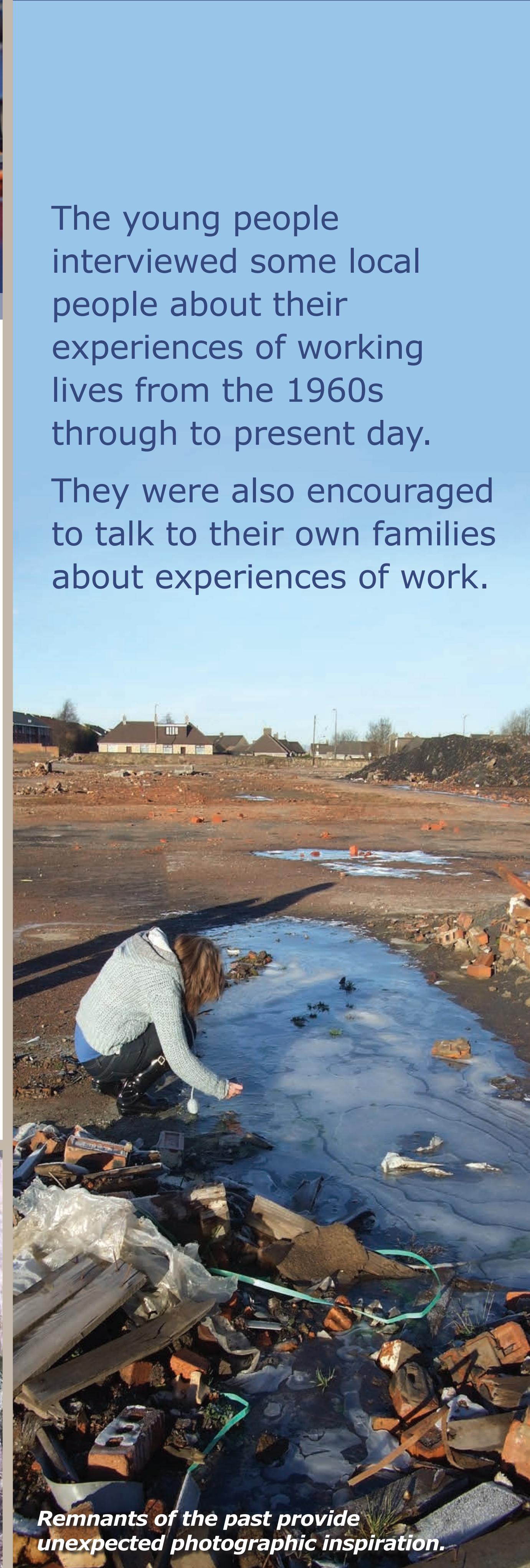
This hospital bed lying abandoned in the deserted grounds of Bangour Hospital captured the attention of all of the project participants.



Scattered bricks declare that this was once the thriving Etna Brickworks.



Derelict buildings provided interesting photo opportunities for the young participants.



Remnants of the past provide unexpected photographic inspiration.

The HYPE participants have also travelled around West Lothian, using the camera lens to capture the remnants of past working life.

Their travels have taken them to some of the locations that formed part of the interviewees' memories.

The rich photograph collections of the council's Library and Heritage Services have been used to complement the images of contemporary West Lothian.

All of the participants have learned new skills and some are planning college applications.

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Starting Out

The Scottish unemployment rate was very low in the 1960s. Young people were often able to start their working lives within a few days of leaving school.



Workers at Dougall's Foundry, Bathgate, c. 1910. In many industries boys started learning their trade when they left school at 14. Some would be formally apprenticed, but many learned on the job, often from their fathers.

Factory Worker

"[I left school] two days after ma' fifteenth birthday. Ah left on the Friday an' a started the job on the Monday and that was the C & A factory in the Glasgow Queenslie Estate."

Chef

"I was an apprentice chef from when I was 15 and until 17 you done the basics of the kitchen and as I got to 17 you started to develop your skills a wee bit more to all the various departments within the hotel kitchen."



Leyland Bathgate Apprentices, 1977. This large group illustrates the number of skilled workers needed by the British Leyland plant.

Image courtesy of Gary Vines.

Nurse

"We were told that if you go to a good training school then the world was your oyster. And it was. If you applied for a job in the likes of Australia, or in South Africa, or the states or in Canada, and they knew that you had the experience at the Royal Infirmary or the Western or the City, or at Edinburgh University in particular, they snapped you up. You were set for life."



Graduation Day, 1955. This was an important event in the life of a young nurse and the culmination of years of hard work.

Bathgate Man

"Ye could walk into a job anywhere... maybe thirty or forty places roondabout here at the time... Ye could walk oot eh a job one day and maybe start the next day in another job... that wis the early 60s... as long as ye had enough tae pay your digs and have a good weekend that's all ye were worried about."



Trainee Firemen, Livingston Fire Station, c.1975.

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Jobs: Past and Present

Some of the oral history interviewees were employed in a range of jobs throughout their working lives. They talked to the young participants about some of their memorable jobs.



Sewing back-pockets on a hemming machine at Levi's, c. 1970.



Staff apply a plaster cast to a young patient at Bangour General Hospital, c.1980.

Nurse

“Well, my first job at Bangour was in orthopaedics. It was both emergency and elective, so we had all sorts of emergencies, and our elective surgery was hip replacements, the odd knee replacement, but they weren't really in vogue at the time like they are now. We had the odd spinal surgery and some hand surgery... and I was doing what I liked. I loved it, I loved orthopaedics, that was my home, that was where I felt comfortable.”

Brickmaker

“Making a brick is just like making a cake. Ye put the ingredients in... ye burn it... and it comes oot the other end. If ye dinnae burn it right it comes oot soft or it comes oot hard.

It looks simple... it's just a brick but it has a lot o' production in it.”



Stacking newly fired bricks at the Etna Works, c.1991.

Butcher

“I'm the owner o' Boghall Butchers. We've developed business over the last twenty years now, developed into the bakery side of things as well.

I am responsible for the day-to-day running of the business. I'm responsible for the buying and the retail side... and generally try to manage to keep the business ticking over...”

Boghall Butchers



Paul Boyle standing proudly outside his butchers shop at Boghall.

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Working Conditions

The late 20th century brought interesting times for workers in West Lothian.



Safe manual handling was not a priority when this picture was taken of a woman brickmaking in the 1960s.

Motorola

“Ah worked in Motorola... ah didnae like it at all. It was too rigid. If ye went to the toilet, they checked how long you were away. It was an American company for a start and they went by the rules. For instance if you smoked, you couldnae smoke in the car park... you had to go and smoke in your car.”

Nursing

“It was like being in one of the forces... not marching or anything, but just to be disciplined and everybody knew exactly where they stood for everything.”



Work in factories like Levi's was hard, repetitive and often dangerous.

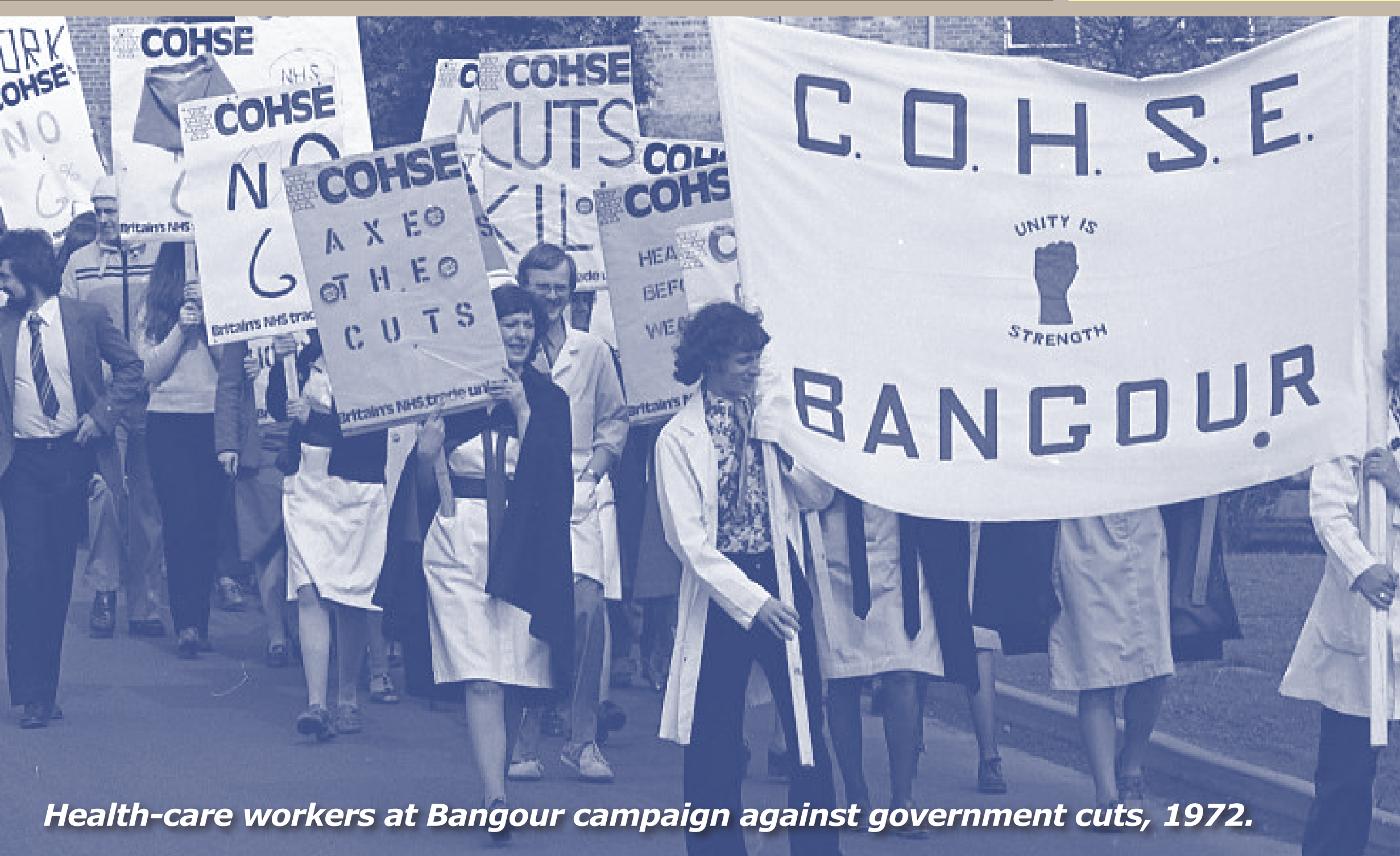
Levi's factory

“Piecework meant ye made your own wage. You got your average, so ye build up yer average through how much per cent yae done... When ah left, ma average wis really quite high because o' all the money ye could make. Ye could make up tae £8, £10 per hour which was a lot o' money then. Ye were coming out with over £300 at the top... ah ended up making more money than ma man.”

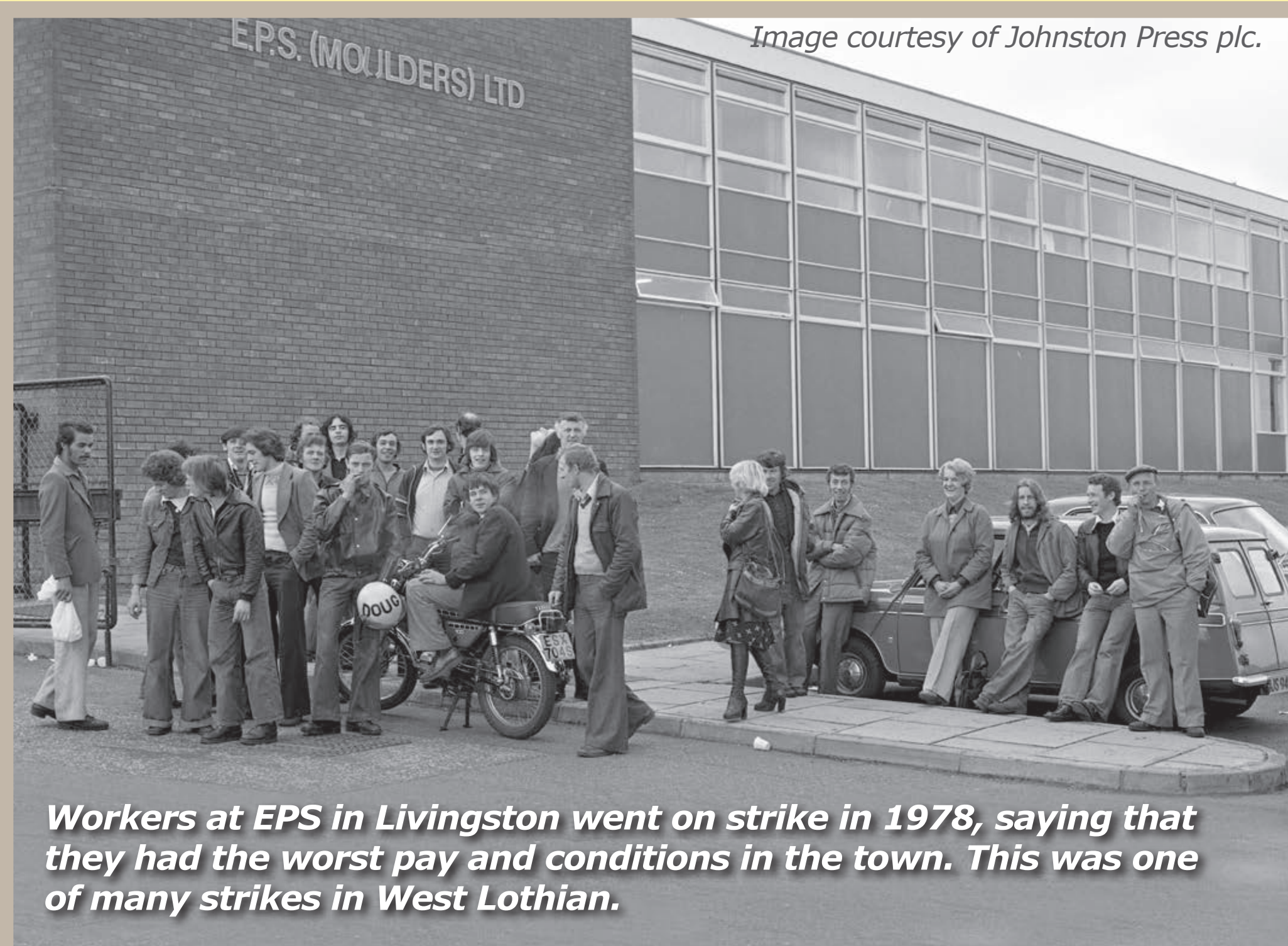
“At the beginning when ah went in they had pink overalls but all the oose frae the waistband wis comin up and ye were absolutely covered... thick wi oose... so we got the health an safety involved and they made us a blower that as you were doing it, it was sooking the air away from ye and ye could go in wi yer pink overalls and ye'd come out wi pink.”



Exterior of Levi's factory.



Health-care workers at Bangour campaign against government cuts, 1972.



Workers at EPS in Livingston went on strike in 1978, saying that they had the worst pay and conditions in the town. This was one of many strikes in West Lothian.

Image courtesy of Johnston Press plc.

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Hard Times: Redundancy and Unemployment

Almost all of the project interviewees had negative experiences of being out of work and all regarded work as an important part of their lives.



Polkemmet was the last colliery in West Lothian. It was closed after the Miner's Strike of 1984-5.

British Leyland

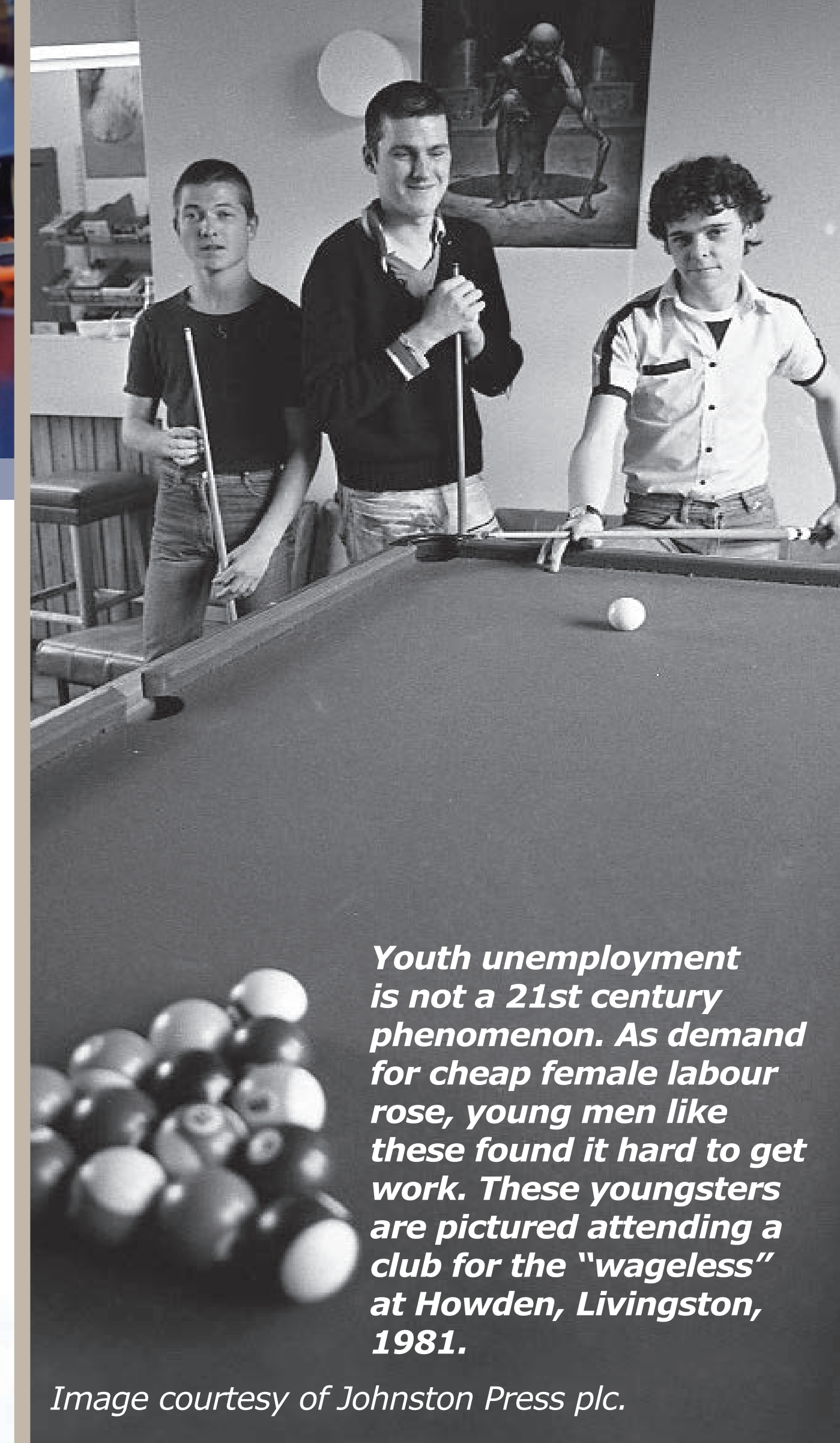
“Ah wis paid off at British Leyland and wis unemployed fir two year and it wis very hard tae get a job. When ye worked all yer life and they thought ye were begging fer money down at the social security but at that time the wife wasnae working either and it wis very hard. Ah got redundancy money from British Leyland but it wasnae great... it didnae dae me two year.”



These young people are learning office skills as part of Broxburn self-help scheme for the unemployed, 1981.
Image courtesy of Johnston Press plc.

Levis

“[When Levis closed] everybody wis crying, we couldnae believe it. For the first time in my life I wis on job-seekers allowance... ah went frae £300 a week to £52 a week.”

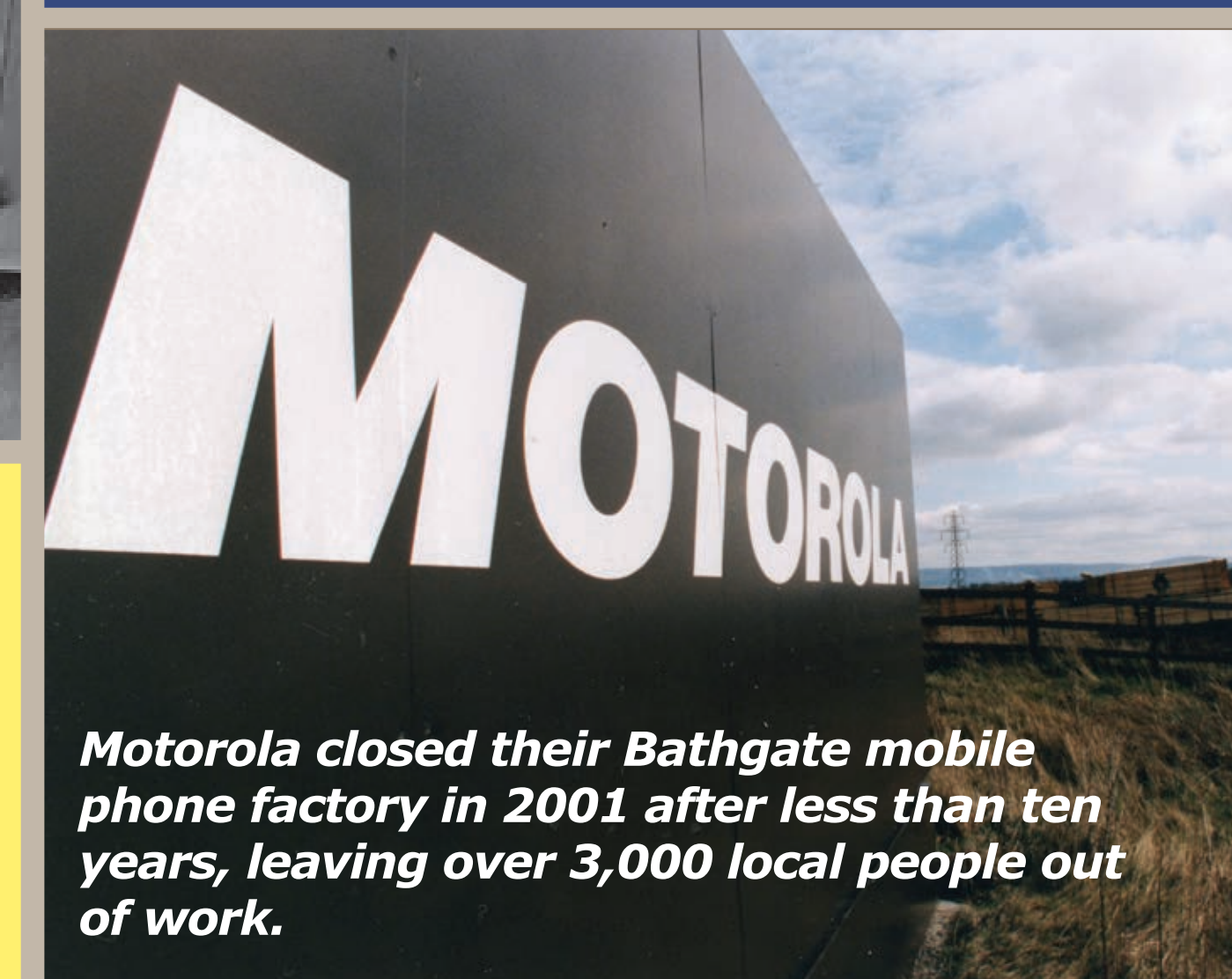


Youth unemployment is not a 21st century phenomenon. As demand for cheap female labour rose, young men like these found it hard to get work. These youngsters are pictured attending a club for the “wageless” at Howden, Livingston, 1981.

Image courtesy of Johnston Press plc.

Etna Brickworks

“[The closure] wisnae announced... ah wis nightshift and ah wis just up. It wis about 2 o'clock. “Come in an collect yer stuff and sign yer letter.” It went into receivership and ah got aboot one and half hours to get ma stuff oot ma locker. I kent it wis coming cos maist o' the brick works are owned by the building companies noo and we were an independent one. At that time there were only three bricks in Scotland... there's only one now and at one time there maybe forty or fifty brickworks in Scotland. Its doon tae one now and that's in Glasgow.”



Motorola closed their Bathgate mobile phone factory in 2001 after less than ten years, leaving over 3,000 local people out of work.

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The Lighter Side of Things: Celebrations and Funny Stories



Bangour Village Hospital, Staff Dance, Co-op Hall, Bathgate, 1970.
Image courtesy of Johnston Press plc.

Chef

“Two pranksters came in to take the grand piano away for tuning and they had management and different staff helping them into the van and of course there were stealing the piano... not there to tune it at all.”

British Leyland

“Maist time ye worked away until ye got finished...till ye finished yer tally... once yer tally was finished ye maybe sat round and had a game o’ cards.”

Bangour Hospital

“...a mental patient took control of the van when we were delivering a food trolley and tried to drive off in the van.”

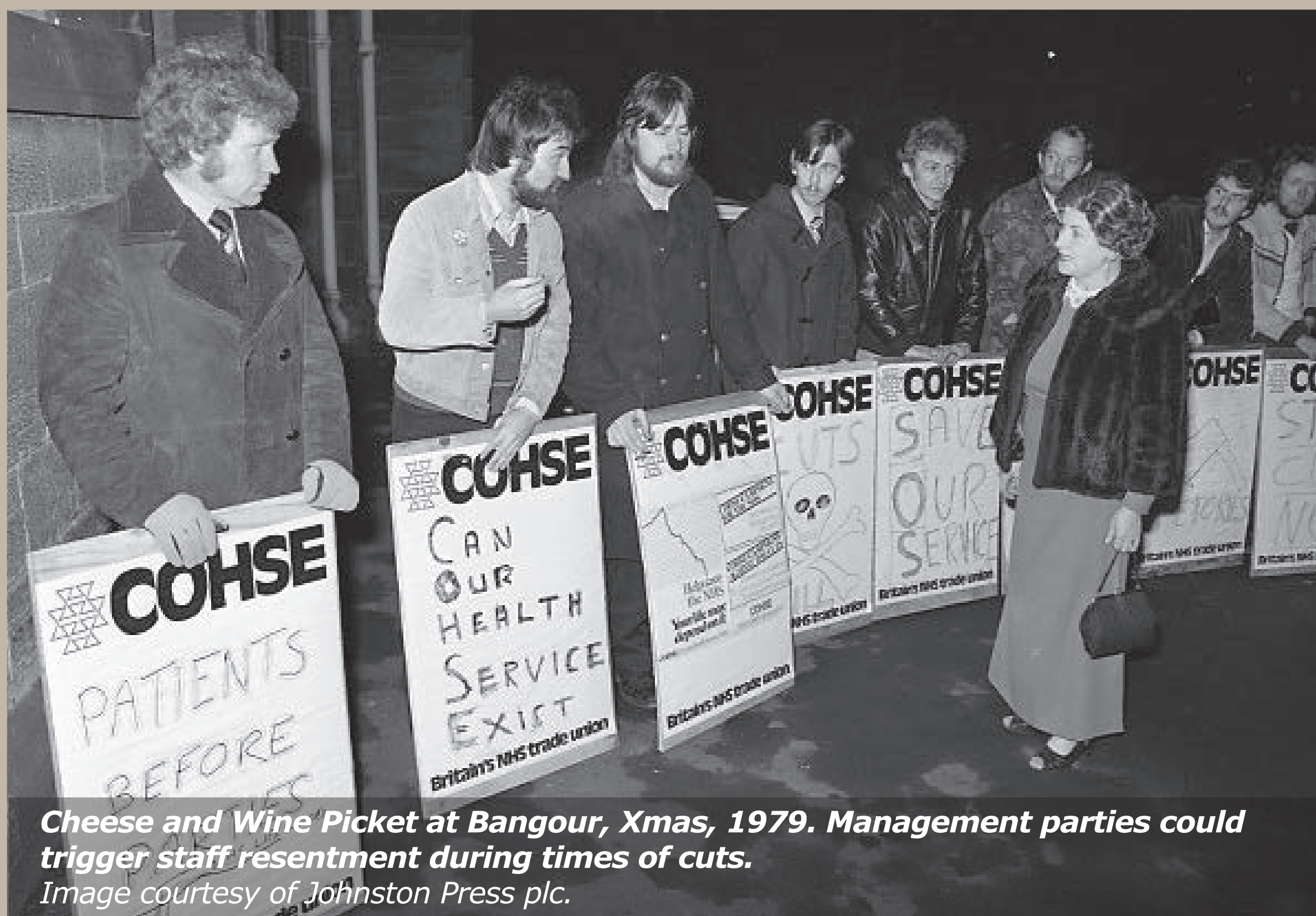


Christmas Comes to Levi's.

Levi's

“It wis like a big family, an at Xmas it was absolutely brilliant. Ah went in every morning tae put decorations up on our line... our line was amazing, it wis fantastic, it really wis...”

“Ye had couples nights out like and em in ma crowd there wis about five couples an ah had tae arrange something tae go somewhere for the weekend but it wis like a mystery tour, they didnae know till they got there and we had tae dress up and we all went intae the hotel dressed up as punks and whatever.”



Cheese and Wine Picket at Bangour, Xmas, 1979. Management parties could trigger staff resentment during times of cuts.
Image courtesy of Johnston Press plc.

Etna Brickworks

“[They had social nights] but they had tae stop them. They fought between themselves but they were friends the next day. They were friends on the Monday... but always ended up wi two or three sitting inside on the weekend. I never got lifted but ah ended up fighting once or twice but on the Monday everything was okay and we had a laugh about it.”

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The 21st Century

Local people who started their working lives in the 1960s and 1970s have clear concerns about the current job market. Nonetheless, the local area has a growing economy. West Lothian's central location and available workforce has made it possible to attract new businesses and create new employment prospects.



Tesco's distribution depot has brought employment to large numbers of local people.



Sky is now the largest private employer in West Lothian.

Tesco built a huge new distribution depot on the site of the old NEC factory, and the Sky customer centre in Livingston continues to grow. The steady increase in population means that the service sector is also growing.

New supermarkets and the expanded shopping centre at Livingston are helping to provide employment across the district. West Lothian's unemployment rate is now lower than the Scottish and UK average.

The Hype project participants may be worried about finding their first job but their new skills and confidence offer promise of a successful working life in West Lothian.



The closure of Hall's of Broxburn was announced in October 2012. The imminent loss of 1700 jobs sent shockwaves through the community. The Hall's brand has now been bought and 50 jobs at the West Lothian distribution facility have been saved.

Former Levis worker

“There's too many goin' after the one job now, that's it, so ye really need to stay on at school if ye really want anything, that's whit we're drumming in tae ma grandkids.”

Nursing

“...the job market is just a nightmare, cos there's no jobs for anybody, unfortunately, and you've got to be at the top of your game as a student to qualify and get a job now. I personally wouldn't like to be in the job market for nursing now.”



The Civic Centre in Livingston is the hub of public sector employment in West Lothian.

Image courtesy of Livingston Camera Club.

West Lothian Council Museums Service would like to acknowledge the hard work the HYPE project participants and the support of Armadale Employability Group. We would also like to thank the oral history interviewees for sharing their memories and generously giving their time to this project.