ISSUE 11 MARCH 2025

Soroptimist International Sunderland

Chartered in 1938

# Our Lasting Legacy Special Edition


Welcome to this Special Edition of Executive Committee News celebrating International Women's Day whose theme for this year is Empowerment. We call for action to unlock equal rights, power, and opportunities for women and a future where everyone is treated equally.

We hope you will enjoy seeing the photos of Molly's unveiling ceremony by the Right Honourable Bridget Phillipson MP Secretary of State for Education Minister for Women and Equalities and held on 10th January 2025.

Dr Ron Lawson, a Sunderland born artist, had been commissioned by the city's Soroptimists, with the support of Sunderland City Council and Apextra CIC, to create a sculpture that would represent a lasting legacy for the Wearside women who – as part of a herculean wartime effort that saw shipyards producing military vessels that were vital to the British armed forces – made their way to the banks of the Wear to do their bit. It was the vision of Soroptimist International Sunderland to deliver a fitting reminder for women shipyard workers, a tribute that will also mark 86 years of the Soroptimists in Sunderland.

The club originally appointed an artist in 2019 but after setbacks, including Covid, went on to commission Dr Lawson to take the work forward.

Made from forged and welded Corten self-weathering steel, the artwork – which is designed to look life-like – celebrates the 700 women who were among the workers who pushed through harsh conditions on the banks of the Wear during the war, often with partners fighting overseas and families to feed at home.

Suzanne Brown, who has been a member of the Soroptimists for more than 35 years, was inspired by Nancy Revell's popular books, Shipyard Girls that she set out to create a tribute that would also act as a celebration of Soroptimists in Sunderland. "These were women undertaking jobs like welding, riveting, burning and rivet catching, as well as general labouring, operating cranes, and painting. It was perilous work. Yet, history seems to have forgotten them. We really felt that these women deserve something – a permanent tribute – to honour their bravery and hard work. We wanted to acknowledge the courage and dedication of the shipyard women, as well as to celebrate the Soroptimists, which has done so much to champion women and girls in this city.

Molly has a back story based on a real woman, Doris Hope, who worked in the yards during the war. The statue stands on the riverside walkway at St Peter's, looking directly across to the Port of Sunderland, on the site of a former shipyard. It is a popular walking and cycling route, meaning many thousands of people will be inspired by the shipyard women every year.

## Doris Hope a real life Molly

The sculpture Molly, is a tribute to the women in Sunderland who, in both World Wars, took on skilled work such as welding, rivet catching and lathe operations in the shipyards to fill vital gaps left by men going off to war. In WWII it was estimated that more than 700 women were employed in these roles on the River Wear.

This is the story of Doris Hope, one of the real Mollys, who went to work in Greenwells, a ship repair yard. Greenwells carried out repairs to naval vessels, floating cranes, merchant ships, as well as the fixing of defence equipment on board merchant ships amongst other things.

Doris, born in 1922 was one of five children to Jeremiah and Annie Hope. When the war started they were living in Hastings Street Hendon and Jeremiah was the Charge Hand in the Machine Shop at Greenwells.

Unions were against the general employment of both women and unskilled men in the yards. They were seen as a dilution and a threat to the existing time served workforce. However such was the need that women were initially recruited and recommended by a family member for a position.

Before starting Greenwells Doris was sent to Wallsend, for training, all on night shift. She found travelling to and from the centre the hardest work of all. Then in the cold winter of 1942 Doris started work as a lathe operator making nuts and bolts in the Machine Shop with her Dad who became the Foreman.

Doris joined the Union and her subs were collected each week by Mr Alderson.

At work she wore trousers, a warm jumper and an overall. She tied a scarf around her hair, to keep it from catching on the belts of the lathe and wore ordinary shoes.

Doris aged 19 just before starting at Greenwells

A former shop worker, Doris found the Machine Shop working conditions cold and dirty, with the occasional visiting rat running along the pipes!

In the Machine Shop there were three women, Doris and two others, all about the same age, but there were also around 30 older women working in different roles in the yard, some of who were in their 50s.

Doris said she was always treated well by the male workers who helped with the more complicated jobs. Apart from their own toilets and supervised lunch area, there was no other separation between the men and women.

To get to work she and her father caught the bus from the Blue House pub on Commercial Road to go down the Dock Bank. Eventually they managed to buy bikes and rode to work together.

In April 1942 Doris married Richard Wilkinson, a time served shipyard joiner. They started married life living with her parents in Hastings Street before getting their own flat. Soon after their marriage Richard was sent away to Devonport to help with D Day preparations, outfitting landing craft and building dummy tanks.

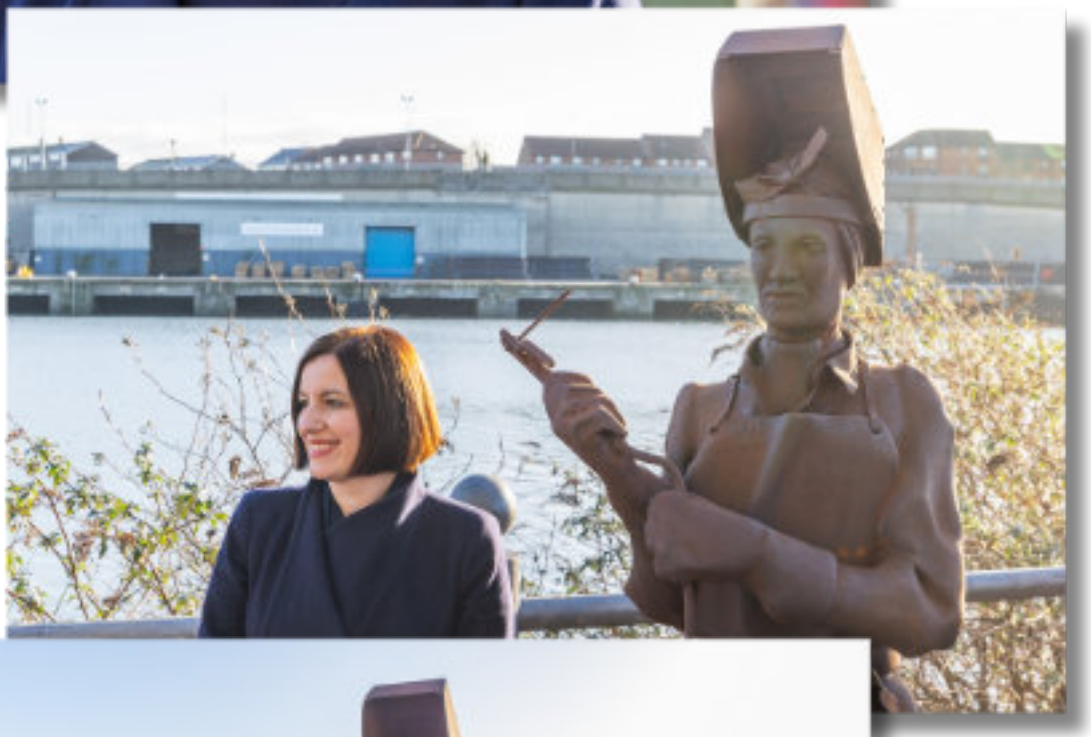
Doris worked after the war ended and four years after starting at Greenwells she left in 1946 when expecting her first child.

Our first introduction to life size
Molly in August 2024
and on the 9th January 2025
in situ having just been installed

Ron Lawson, Councillor Beth Jones and Sue Brown

Sue Brown,
Author Amanda Walton aka Nancy Revel
and Ron Lawson

Bridget Phillipson said: ‘As MP for Houghton and Sunderland South and Minister for Women and Equalities I am proud to have unveiled this brilliant Sculpture...I hope the statue serves as inspiration for young women across our city to embrace the industries of tomorrow and continue to fight for equality.’



Soroptimists enjoying the sunshine  on a very cold day
and Sue Brown being interviewed
by Julia Barthram from ITV

£1.30

YOUR DAILY LOWDOWN ON LIFE IN SUNDERLAND

# Sunderland Echo

## 'A FITTING TRIBUTE'

Statue honouring city 'shipyard girls' of war years is unveiled on banks of Wear

SEE PAGE 5

Ahmed closes in on Cats debut

Page 55

Eight pages of brain teasers

Start page 25

Dealer hid drugs in hotel ceiling

Page 9

'Don't miss out on vital cash'

Page 12



SUNDERLAND BRIEFING

## Sculpture immortalises work of women in the wartime shipyards

By Echo Reporter

"We feel that these women deserve a permanent tribute to honour their bravery"