

## LEST WE FORGET

### WOMEN IN 1917

In July 1917, the war is entrenched into the national psyche. The Battle of the Somme is over and the military, under General Haig are gearing up for a new offensive in Flanders. The battle of Passchendaele, also known as the third battle of Ypres, is a battle that sees four million shells used and the number of casualties, missing wounded and lives lost at around half a million on both sides.

At the same time the City of Coventry is preparing for this new offensive in the munitions and armament factories across the city, making a great many of the shells and armaments used at Passchendaele. These factories, are staffed to a great degree by women, as the work force is depleted of men serving on the Western Front. Women undertook roles previously done by men, doing work that was physically arduous, often dangerous and vital to the war effort.

July 1917 also saw the launch of National Baby week, instituted by the government in response to the low birth rates and high infant mortality rates. The sub heading on one of the *posters 'The Saving of the race,'* spoke directly to women's duty as mothers and is juxtaposed with the mass employment of women and their move from the private to the public sphere.

#### **My question:**

Did the Coventry women see a new freedom in their work which had traditionally been done by men? Did they envisage a different future?

If they did, how did this challenge the message of National Baby week and expectations of women's civic duty as mothers?