



## VOLUNTARY ACTION HISTORY SEMINARS

VAHS seminar series at the Institute of Historical Research

### SEMINAR ABSTRACT

12 May 2014

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'I dread every morning except Sunday': Dr Clarence Northcott, Seebohm Rowntree, and the Work Motivation Experiments at the Interwar Cocoa Works.

Every year, countless sociology and psychology students settle down to classes on the 'Hawthorne effect', the apparent discovery made by Dr Elton Mayo and others at Western Electric's Hawthorne plant near Chicago. These experiments, conducted from 1924-32, appeared to demonstrate that experimental subjects act differently when they know they are being experimented upon. These students might then go on to learn that the conduct and findings of the Hawthorne experiments have been vigorously contested by sociologists, statisticians, and historians of science ever since.

What they will not learn is that the Hawthorne experiments were not unique, and neither were their conclusions or influence. In fact, British industry was also a site of rich investigation into worker motivation, worker psychology and social relations. This paper therefore explores contemporaneous and self-consciously similar investigations at the Cocoa Works at York. Jointly conducted by the famous confectionary firm Rowntree & Company, and the Industrial Health Research Board, the results of the experiments were published as several articles and books. In addition, their influence spilled over into other British companies and sectors.

As at Hawthorne, the Rowntree investigations were specifically into what managerial tactics could be used to make workers more productive. Did workers work out of a sense of social expectations, or simply because they are paid? If so, what type of payment worked best? While the Hawthorne experiments appeared to demonstrate that voluntarism and group expectations were the primary drivers behind harder work, the Rowntree experiments actually showed that factory workers worked better when they were closely supervised and paid by results.

We have no historical account of the Rowntree experiments, or this striking outcome. As will be discussed, that the Hawthorne experiments were unique - or even particularly important - was considerably amplified by Henry Landsberger's *Hawthorne Revisited* (1958), which in turn propagated Hawthorne's message that attention to worker pay should be subservient to improved social relations. To a postwar Western society which possessed full employment and increasing affluence, these results were both encouraging and useable. To a present-day society which possesses neither full employment nor increasing affluence, the contrasting Rowntree experiences offer a thought-provoking alternative.