

UPLIFTING HISTORY

A Devon Disability Collective employee has delved into the factory's history and made some uplifting discoveries, LAURA DALE writes



The factory at the Devon Disability Collective offices

Gossard Underwear Factory was stationed on Marsh Barton trading estate in Exeter for more than 30 years. The factory, which is now home to social enterprise the Devon Disability Collective (DDC), was responsible for the production and manufacture of Gossards most famous asset, the Wonder Bra. Luke Rogers from DDC has been delving into the company's Exeter past. He reveals: "The factory had a ten feet statue on the roof of Venus De Milo! Rumour has it she is now in a field in Tedburn." He continues: "Gossards most successful garment was the Wonder Bra, brought over from Canada through a licensing agreement with a lingerie company, by the factory manager Bill Healy."

A cleavage enhancing bra called Canadelle's had been developed in Canada prior to the Wonder Bra, but it was later deemed unsuitable for the Canadian market and dropped from its range. Luke explains: "It was Bill and his colleagues that saw the potential of this bra that was further developed by Gossard and given the name 'Wonder Bra.'"

The Wonder Bra became a worldwide success, driven by a powerful marketing campaign. The production methods of this bra were developed and manufactured at the Exeter factory. During the 1970s the Exeter factory was the first in the UK to develop systems for moulding seamless bra cups, this was then followed by a manufacturing facility at the Exeter plant.

In the early 1980s female labour became in

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ABOUT DDC:

The Devon Disability Collective (DDC) formed in July 2015 and was a 'workers collective' takeover from the previous owners, who planned to close the factory and would have otherwise led to many of the employees being made redundant. The purpose of the social enterprise is to provide employment for people with disabilities and those furthest from the labour market. The business was saved from closure by the staff, the Union, council leader John Hart and Labour MP Ben Bradshaw.



short supply as other prestigious jobs were on the market. In 1984 with the threat of cheaper overseas labour, Gossard decided to close its Exeter Factory and reopened a plant in Mendez Messel, Tunisia. The Workshop for the Disabled (DDC's former name) moved to the old Gossard site in 1985 and the production and manufacture of bras was replaced by a different kind of upholstery. Luke says: "The DDC has a real diverse portfolio providing wheelchair products for the NHS and private sector, contract sewing, contract packing for telecoms and re-upholstery for the rejuvenation of old furniture, classic cars, campervans and motorbikes." ■

If you were a Gossard girl, or worked for DDC in the past, or even know the whereabouts of Venus De Milo, e-mail Luke Rogers at luke@devondisabilitycollective.org.