

**CHANGING
PLACES
OF WORK**

HOFORS

INTRODUCTION

KEY FACTS: HOFORS

- Located in the Swedish iron belt *Bergslagen*
- Small community of under 10.000
- One of Sweden's most important steel exporting companies in the 1950s and 60s
- Impacted by the recession of the 1970s; in 1978, the old blast furnace was closed down
- Steel mill today producing specialised steel, utilising 97% steel scrap
- Carbon footprint of products is 80% lower compared to global average
- Proposed new hydrogen plant for producing green steel
- Hydrogen will be supplied by an on-site electrolysis plant, Sweden's largest

From inside the Mill in Hofors



MAPPING CHANGE

Hofors is an old *bruksort*; a town based around the steel industry. The steel plant was originally owned by SKF, a company that played a decisive role in the emergence and development of Hofors. The mill is currently owned by Ovako, which is part of the Japan-based Nippon Steel Corporation, and remains Europe's leading manufacturer of ball bearing steel. The town itself has experienced a slow decline in population and commercial activity since the steel crisis of the 1970s.

As part of the drive for green steel manufacturing in Sweden, Hofors has been proposed as the site for the country's largest fossil-free hydrogen facility, via a joint initiative by Ovako, Volvo Group, Hitachi Energy, H2 Green Steel, and Nel Hydrogen, supported by the Swedish Energy Agency. Ovako's mill in Hofors will become the first one in the world to use hydrogen in order to heat steel as part of the rolling process, and the plan is for the project to be operational by 2030, the goal being completely carbon neutral steel manufacture.

The majority of Hofors residents we spoke to have both a positive attitude towards the project and a great deal of confidence in its success. They believe that this change will provide workers with an assurance of stable employment, as well as potentially generate some new jobs. Primarily they believe it will lead to a greater degree of economic stability in Hofors, partially revitalising the town and assuring its survival. Though there is a hope that the new technology can lead to social and economic revitalisation, no one believes that Hofors can return to its Golden Age.



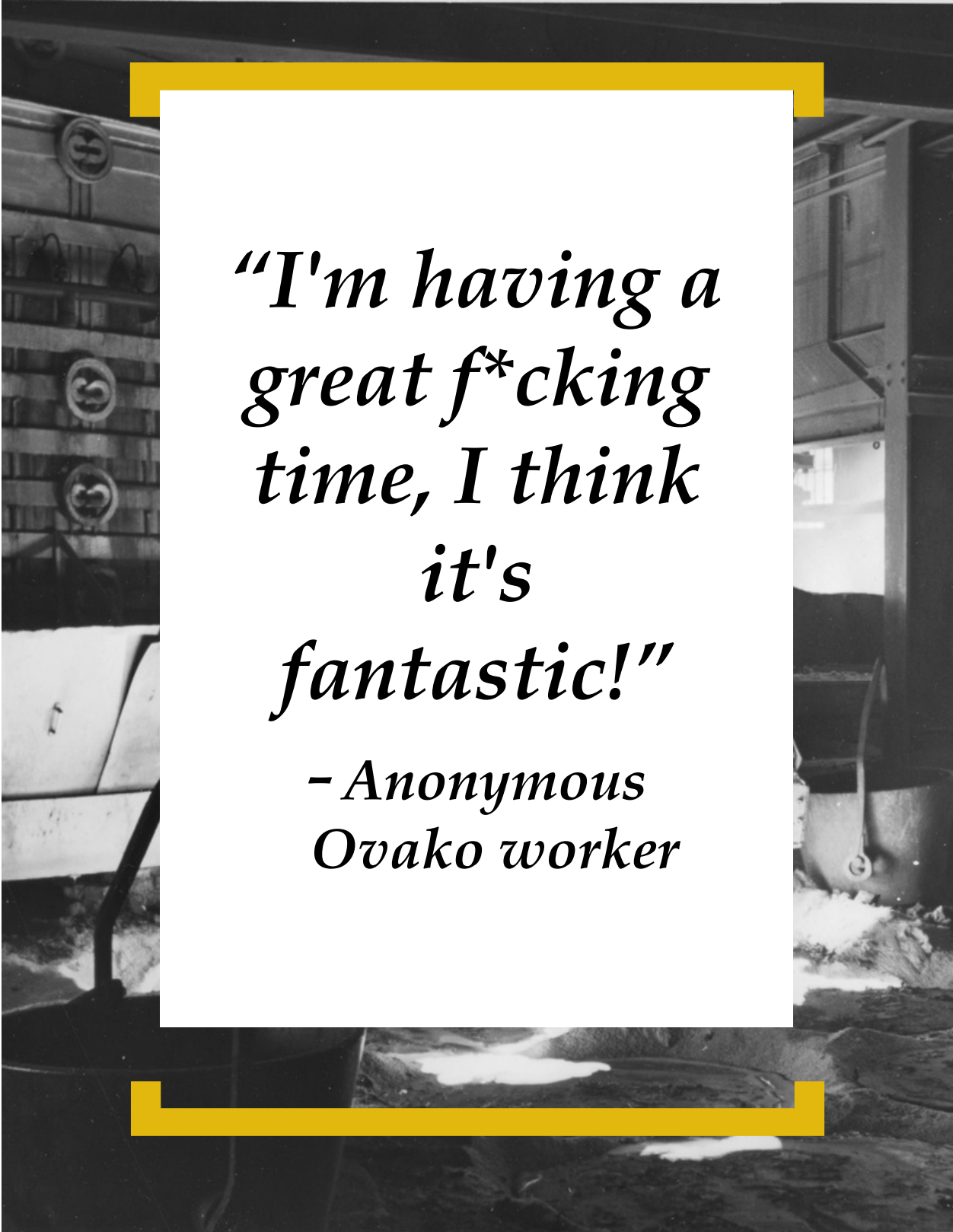
Hofors archives: notebooks from the mine, showing activity dating back to 1740.

CHANGING PLACES OF *WORK*

The reputation of the steel mill has historically been that of a dirty and filthy work-place. In spite of improvements, this reputation remains to this day, and the workers who participated in the study speak of how they work in dark, dusty, and very hot rooms. The positive side is the camaraderie among the workers, and the freedom and opportunity to manage their own work and take a lot of personal responsibility. Many of them also enjoy the work itself and find it very interesting. There have also always been opportunities for workers to change jobs and departments within Ovako, and try their hand at something new. Additionally, the salaries are good and the job is quite secure.

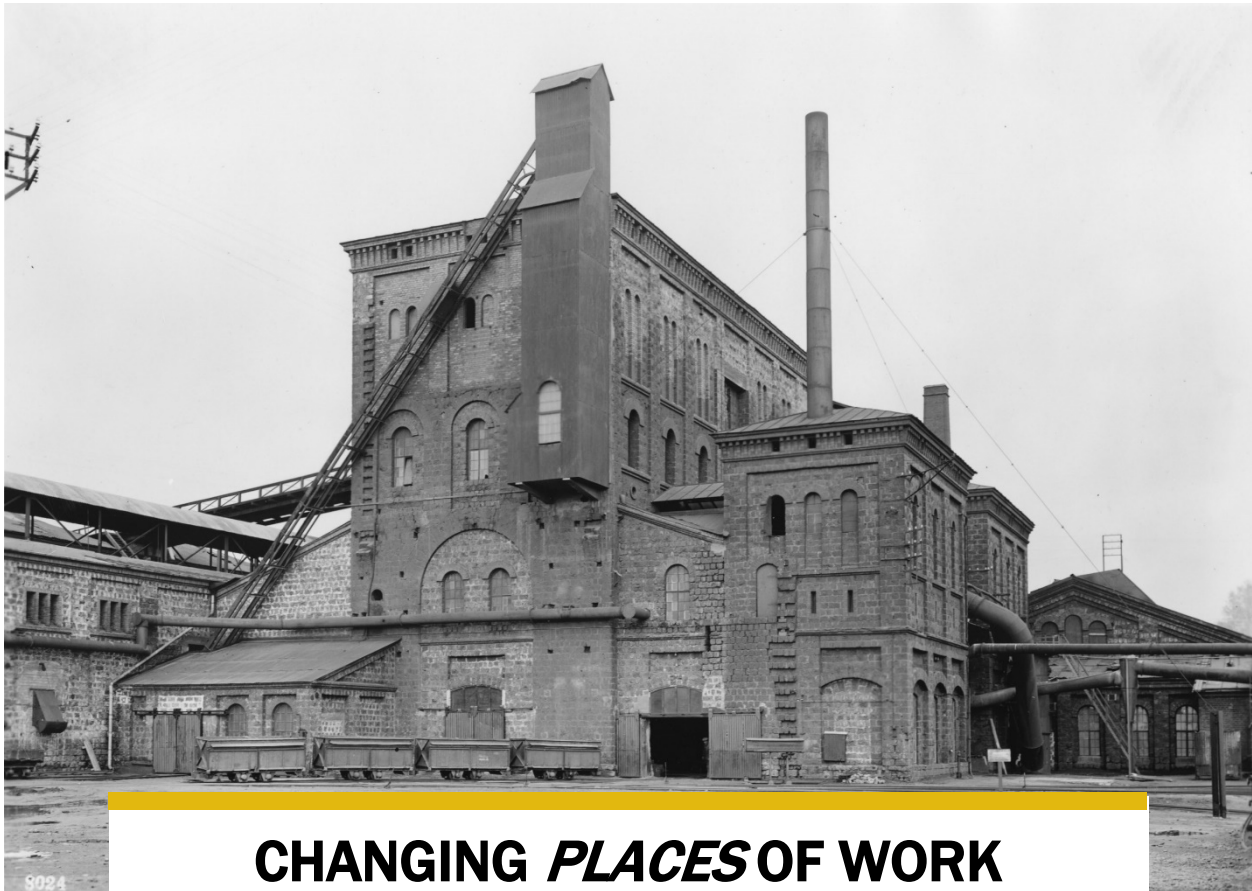
Over time, there have been shifts in the nature of work. These occurred gradually, and were attributed by the present workers to how the steel industry itself operates globally. They feel that there has been a shift towards a more long-term mindset, and an emphasis on efficiency: gone are the old days when the company would take part in building society. In the past, they had their own brass band and bandy team, and even owned cows and a local supermarket, which is all gone now. The manufacturing side of the organisation has now been scaled back, and operates with fewer people, making it financially sustainable even during a slump, but creating more pressure on individual workers, leading to more stress.

No real change in the nature of the work is expected in the near future, although hydrogen handling requires specialised training. Though the workers expressed some concerns over this, they thought themselves more than capable of it given that they presently handle large quantities of liquefied petroleum gas. Most believe that some financially beneficial effects will come out of the transition, and that the new technology will make things more secure. The vision of the workplace is one of continuity, rather than drastic improvements or decline.



*“I'm having a
great f*cking
time, I think
it's
fantastic!”*

*- Anonymous
Ovako worker*



CHANGING *PLACES* OF WORK

The people of Hofors who participated in our study are all proud of their town and enjoy living there. The town is nice and quiet, it's safe and comfortable; people know each other and share strong connections. There is a good social life, and a strong sense of community. Many mentioned the Hofors-spirit – *Hoforsandan* –, founded on a sense of solidarity between all Hofors' residents. They come together when it's needed: people take care of each-other and keep an eye out for each-other - though some interpreted this as nosiness and small-town gossip. Locals we spoke to also showed a great deal of knowledge of, and pride in, earlier local technical innovations, e.g. the first electrically powered rolling mill, or plasma-based steel manufacture.

Yet older participants in particular strongly feel that something has changed over time; a certain spirit has disappeared from the youth, and connections between

people have diminished. In the past, the steel mill took social responsibility and was an integral part of the social fabric in the community, but that's no longer the case. Everyone has taken note of an overall decline in local activities, such as sports, as well as a marked decline in local commercial activity.

Continuous slow depopulation is something everyone has noticed, and Hofors is no longer as wealthy as it once was. The feeling that Hofors's best days are behind them was shared by most participants, though they still held out hope that the coming changes could halt this decline, and that their town can survive for at least a little longer. There is a reluctance to voice any particular vision for the future, and people don't believe that the negative developments so far can ever be fully reversed.



“In the past, the steel mill and the community were one and the same, now they are two different things.”

- Retired Hofors resident

MANAGING CHANGE

Old-time steel mill workers we spoke to have endured quite a few changes over the years, and their response to this has been personal adaptation. They accept the changes that have occurred as the new reality they find themselves in, and do their outmost within their new situation. Workers possess a great deal of understanding of the company's situation and needs, and identify strongly with the company. They do not complain about the company itself, and even when addressing negative changes they still show an understanding for why those changes were necessary – often even praising the company for making tough choices that got them through hard times.

Retired participants manage whatever anxieties they may have about the future by focusing on the present: the community of Hofors, and the social and family life that they have there.

The union representatives who participated see their role as confined to handling everyday issues, and they see themselves as having no real influence on the grander changes taking place. Active union representatives try to adapt to the changing situation and accept their limitations, and try to mitigate potential negative impacts.

Representatives of local business organisations we spoke to acknowledge the challenges facing Hofors, and respond by working towards building networks and connections and facilitating the establishment of new projects. Their region faces challenges around creating job opportunities and struggles with various skill supply issues. They identify a great need to attract the skills needed for the future, and to attract people to modern technology in general and the steel and metals industry specifically. There is technical cluster in the region that has potential, but requires improved cooperation to advance that potential.

This snapshot is a part of the communication efforts of the the research project *Changing places of work: A place-based approach for re-imagining work in fossil free industrial towns of the future*. It presents a brief picture of one of the study sites examined within the scope of project. For more information, see:

<https://portal.research.lu.se/en/projects/changing-places-of-work-a-place-based-approach-for-re-imagining-w>

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Photo on page 2 from the Ovako historical archives in Hofors, taken by authors with permission from Ovako.

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