

LLEISIAU O LAWR Y FFATRI / VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR

Johnson & Johnson Sanitary Protection / Fabrics (1946-53) A. H Hunts (capacitors) / Filmcap / Unilator Technical Ceramics (1970-78)

Interviewee: VN025 Nesta Davies

Date: 12: 06: 2014

Interviewer: Kate Sullivan on behalf of Women's Archive Wales

Nesta confirmed her name, address and date of birth, namely 13/06/1932

Her daughter Julie was also present during the interview.

She was one of seven children and remembers the war starting when she was eight. When the sirens went off, their mother used to take them to the cellars of the old school. Her father was in both world wars and her eldest brother was in the army too and a sister in the ATS. Her mother worked in service, and because she had seven children she used to take washing in.

Nesta went to Ruabon council school and then to Acrefair secondary school, leaving at fourteen. She didn't care much for school but says she wasn't a bad scholar and was good at arithmetic and English. The family didn't speak Welsh in the village unlike the village of Rhosllanerchrugog nearby which was very Welsh.

After leaving school she worked in a bakery, icing cakes and cleaning tables but she says the money wasn't very good, and she had to catch the bus into Wrexham. After that, she worked in a launderette in Llangollen, washing sheets for hotels, and they had to carry heavy sheets and put them in the rollers. She found it very hard work and couldn't cope and after about six weeks she heard about a job in a factory at Llangollen, which wove wool blankets. She went down and asked for a job and got one, earning five shillings a week more than she was getting at the laundrette. The bus fare to Llangollen was five shillings anyway, she said. "In them days, if you didn't work, you couldn't go on the dole or anything like that then, I don't remember anything about the dole anyway."

She didn't have a formal interview just talked to the manager, who told her to start on Monday. She liked the job. "I had two looms there but they were great big long ones for blankets." They used to receive fleeces and they had to cut all the 'pitch' (dirt and muck) off with big shears. Then the fleece was sent to be cleaned before being made into wool. They used to wind the wool onto 'big

round winding things' and they used to put that on the looms. The looms had eyelets and to avoid a 'smash' with the shuttle, you had to make sure you were pulling them through the correct eyelets. She was there three years making long pieces of wool which then went away to be cut into blankets. They also made suits there but Nesta wasn't on the suits. The blankets were for both shops and for the army.

She had some training when she started, especially in learning how to use the correct eyelets. Sometimes the shuttle used to 'go' and break the threads. She was living at home in Ruabon and got the bus to Llangollen at 7.30 in the morning; she worked until 6pm and then caught the 6.30 bus home. "We worked long hours really, you know." She liked the weaving work but the money wasn't very good, something like one pound, five shillings week (£1.25p?) They were paid in cash, in an envelope, and five shillings went on bus fare. She'd give the pound to her mother and her mother would give her two shillings back, in case she wanted to go to the pictures or something.

8.45 They were all girls there and everyone was paid the same, except for a couple of girls who were charge hands, who trained the other girls; Nesta think they probably were paid a bit more but she doesn't know for certain or how much.

There were about twenty of them in this factory, but in the next factory there was a lot more, and about eight hundred looms. While she was in the blanket factory, she heard about another factory, Johnson and Johnson, where they looped sanitary towels, and that the pay was around £2 a week, "which was a heck of a difference to us when we were that age." She can't remember how she got the job at Johnson and Johnson, but she thinks it was through somebody she knew who was already working there. She was only in the new job for about three months, looping sanitary towels. when a 'gentleman' came into the factory and asked if any of the girls wanted to go across the road to the weaving factory, that was also part of Johnson and Johnson, i.e. Johnsons Fabrics. **"I jumped at the chance. I didn't like doing the sanitary towels anyway. The money was better still in the weaving factory cos we had piece work and we had a clock on the loom, and how much stuff went out was clocking on the loom, and we made about four pounds fifty-six, something like that."**

In the sanitary towel factory, they didn't do piece work. In that factory, the sanitary towels used to come along on a slow conveyor belt and the girls had to pick them off and add the loops on with a 'loop thing', on each side, making sure the 'blue thing' was straight at the back. Then they used to pack them and let them go down again. The loops weren't sown on but put on with a hook, though she can't remember exactly how she did that, but she remembers hooking them both sides. They sat on tall seats and she remembers fainting once, the seats weren't comfortable, and very hard. If there was anything wrong with the looping, the sanitary towels were out on one side and sent back to be redone. A supervisor would be overseeing their work. She thinks she probably did hundreds of sanitary towels in a day, They were all girls, though she thinks there were a few men there too.

Nesta said that in the next factory, Johnson Fabrics, that there were men working whom they called 'tattlers' and they would repair the looms if anything broke. These men were from Yorkshire. She says the looms were quite dangerous because the cotton was thin and the shuttle sometimes used to shoot out and it had a hard point on the end. She remembers somebody being hit in the shoulder once "but I've seen the shuttles coming out and going onto the floor, you know."

This factory, she thinks, was also part of Johnsons "or they wouldn't have let us go otherwise." Not many girls chose to go; Nesta went because she liked weaving and she didn't like the job she was doing "it was very very boring with the sanitary towels and actually it was very tiring." When she fainted at the sanitary towel place, she was taken to hospital. "I remember my mum said she was cooking chips ready for me to come home and she didn't know I was in hospital, cos you didn't have

telephones in those days, did you?" She had something wrong with her stomach, she can't remember what exactly, but was in hospital a week. The company didn't pay her any sick pay.

15.30 In Johnsons Fabrics, she caught her finger in the loom: "It just flattened it, it didn't break it. I couldn't put the loom on, so they had to switch all the looms off to come and get my finger out. It was about half an hour, I think, before they got it out. Half of the factory was shut off, you know." They 'weren't too bad' on health and safety, she said. She had another accident there too, and says she is accident prone. The second time, she slipped and fell on her back. One of the bosses took her to hospital and they said she'd bruised or cracked a rib, and she was off for about six weeks, but the factory did give her some money. She doesn't think the other factory gave sick pay when she fainted.

To get to work, she had to catch the 4.15 miners bus from Ruabon to Wrexham and then wait for the half past five bus to take her to Marchweil. She had to be at the factory for six o'clock. She had to leave the house at 4am. After she'd been there for about four years, a bus started running direct from Ruabon to Marchweil so she didn't have to get up so early. She travelled to work with five other girls from the village. Her sister also worked in the factory.

She started work in 1946; she was three years in the blanket factory, and went to the sanitary towel factory at seventeen. She said the sanitary towel factory and Johnson Fabrics were in Marchweil, which is now Wrexham industrial estate. Both factories used the same canteen.

She met her husband in Johnsons Fabrics. He used to clean the fluff off all the looms and also had two looms of his own where he used to weave. Off tape, Julie, Nesta's daughter, told her that her father used to make excuses to come and clean Nesta's loom and she used to say "I had the cleanest loom in the place." She was nearly nineteen when they married, after courting for about a year. Her husband had come to lodge with her mother because he lived right out in the country and it was easier for him to get the bus with them. Later on, she went to work on the back of her husband's motorbike.

"And then he got a little motorbike and we used to go, it was nice on the motorbike because we didn't have to rush so much, you know, and there wasn't a lot of traffic on the road. There were no helmets in them days. I've come off a few times. We went under a tractor once but never got hurt. And we come off in the floods. And we come off on an icy road. I used to have a 'snapping tin', you used to put your sandwiches in it, we called it a 'snapping tin'. And I used to carry it under my arm on the bike and we were going on this icy road, it was a bitter cold morning, and it was about half past five, and the bike went from under us and I slid along the road with my snapping tin under my arm."

They hadn't been going fast but the road was bad because they didn't salt them in those days. They went on to work all the same, neither of them were hurt. She said a lot of things happened on that motorbike, both when they were going to work and when they were out and about. She never learned to ride it but always went on the back. He once had an 'Indian' bike that had a switch under the seat and if her husband was going too fast, she'd switch it off.

24.14 Nesta was in the weaving factory for about three years until she had her first child in 1953 and she worked 'right till the end.' She finished work for about three years to look after her daughter. Her husband, Lloyd, was on piece work and they were living on his wage. After a while, he left the factory and went to work on farms, being a farmer's son, and they lived in tied cottages, moving a lot, because they couldn't get a council house. At one stage they went to live in Bangor on Dee and later in Ruabon. She had three children in this time and then went back to work in the same factory, Johnsons Fabric, while her sister looked after her children for a while, until they moved

again and she couldn't look after them any more and besides she had a child of her own. Nesta and Lloyd were on different shifts; she on the morning shift and he on the afternoon and it took about half an hour to change shifts. **“So the lady next door looked after the little girl, she was about one, while I changed shifts, so there was always one, me or my husband, with the children, you know.”**

Altogether, Nesta was seven years in this factory, three years, then the children, then another few years. The factory closed down then which is why she finished. The company was from Yorkshire and she says they were lovely people to work for. She wasn't quite sure what they made but some of the looms, like the one Lloyd worked on, were huge and they were weaving gauze, like on a sanitary towel, so she thinks it was all to do with medical purposes, they didn't weave cloth. “And if you had a smash with the shuttle, it took ages to mend the smash.” A smash happened when the loom crashed into the material and all the threads would break. In this case, you'd have to go round the back of the loom and bring all the thread back through again, into the right holes.

There must have been a packing place and the produce was sent out, she thinks, because lorries used to come. It was a big factory and the building is still there. When Nesta was there she thinks there were about sixty women working there, mostly women on the looms, and the men cleaned and repaired them, three or four 'tattlers.' The men didn't weave though her husband had two big looms in another part of the factory.

30:00 As regards the conditions in the factory, she said it wasn't cold, but in the summer they had to paint the glass or plastic roof with white wash to keep the sun out. **“You don't realise how hard it was until you look back, because you were so glad to have a job. You had to lip read, it was that loud. When I had my finger stuck, I couldn't make anybody to hear me. And this girl, Alma, happened to look towards me and she come running to me. Only for her, like, it must have been five or ten minutes before I could get anybody's attention.”** It wasn't broke, it was just flat, and she didn't have any compensation **“you never thought about it in them days.”**

When she had her first child, she only got eight shillings a week from the state, but nothing at all for the second or the third. Her husband kept working until the factory closed and after worked on the lorries, taking livestock to abattoirs. When they moved back to Ruabon, he worked as a sort of handyman, then worked for a local electric company.

“I was living in a small house then, one up one down, in Acrefair and it was fourteen and six a week for the rent, fourteen shillings and sixpence. He was working in the brickyard then and getting four pounds something, I couldn't work then cos I had the children, and it was three pound odd for the shop, for the food,' so you didn't have much left for clothes, for 'lectric, for rent, you know.”

Nesta went back to work for financial reasons and worked until she was sixty, though she finished factory work at the age of 47 in 1979.

She got on alright in the factories with the other women, there weren't many rows, everybody was working for the money, but they were all very nice. People came from all over to work there, from the surrounding towns, like Rhos, with about seven from Ruabon. Most were about Nesta's age, some were older. On the whole they were single. She couldn't tell if women tended to go back after having children. When she returned, all the women who were there were still single.

38:00 Regarding trade unions, she doesn't remember if there was one in Johnsons, but there was one in 'Filmcap', i.e. A. H. Hunts (capacitors) which made plastic film caps. Nesta also worked in a brickyard she said. She was living at home for some reason and her mother looked after the

children when they weren't in school. She can't remember if there was union there but she said the brickyard was very heavy work so she left and went to Filmcap. She can't remember joining a union ever but she does remember a strike at Filmcap and the workers were all standing outside. She was a charge hand at the time and she had to go in, which she said was awkward:

“They were striking over something, I don't know what it was, but they had a strike and they were all standing outside and there was a couple of charge hands and we had to go in, you know, into the factory, and they were booing us. They got over it after, like, you know.”

Nesta also worked nights at Filmcap. She said first she was a Leading Hand, prior to becoming a Charge Hand. The work involved putting resin in units 'going through hot things' and the Leading Hands had to watch that it was being done properly. From that, she moved onto be a Leading Hand on the winding part, where they wound the units, and there they asked her if she would be charge hand. **“And that was different, it was in a white overall, it wasn't in a green overall.”**

“And what happened there, we were all getting used to the money and the job was going up and and everything and an American firm took over. And they came and they said there were too many chiefs and not enough indians.”

The new firm offered redundancy and a lot of people took it, because they didn't like it where they were.

“They finished all the Charge Hands, and they finished me as well. I could please myself whether I took my redundancy or go back on the line with less money, so I took my redundancy at that time. I just didn't like what was going on, you know.”

She'd been there about four years at that point. She had been living in a council house when she started there in Acrefair but during that time they moved to Legacy, where the rent was cheaper. Her husband wanted to move back because he'd got a job there and there was a house to go with it, and Nesta said **“Well, if I can still go to the factory, I'll come.”** There were two girls living in the village who also worked at Filmcap and they gave her a lift, she used to pay them towards the petrol.

43:00 The Filmcap factory was in Rhosymedre and they were producing 'stuff for aeroplanes, all to do with work for the government.' They made her redundant but then said she could come back but she didn't want to under the new firm. Her redundancy was **'five hundred and odd pound but it was a lot to us in them days.'**

After this, she went to work at the Unilator Technical Ceramics factory, which she said was also to do with units and the government. The factory is still there. She was 42 when she was made redundant and sometime after this, she had a mastectomy. She said she walked out of the ceramic factory once; there was a man there, who'd also been at Filmcap, a production manager, who said he'd always had a high regard for her and if she wanted to come back, she could. She still has this letter. She said she walked out because one of the mangers wasn't a very nice man. She had a bad shoulder at the time and this man was a stranger, she'd never seen him before, so she walked out and went to her daughter's house. He was telling her off in a nasty way so she just walked out. **“I didn't like him at all. I walked out, he didn't tell me to go. He was the new boss that had come there. Anyway, the production manager and the charge hand, Mr Williams, came here to ask me to go back.”**

She didn't go back, this was in 1978.

“I'd had my mastectomy while I was working there and I don't know whether it was caused from there, there was a bad place there, like, they said 'don't go in these rooms,' that it wasn't good for you, you know. And it's a funny thing, there's three women that had lost their breasts working there. . . And this one room was a private room, something they were making in there, I don't know what they were making there, but there was a lot of white dust.”

Apparently, they were just told, not forbidden, to go into this room, and the cleaners went in there to clean it.

“There was a girl from Rhos, she had her breast off, and there was one from Ruabon who had her breast off, and I had mine, but I never put it down to that till years later, you know.”

Nesta thinks the factory did cause her cancer. A girl from Johnstown did come to the house and asked if she would complain and she said she would but she never heard anything else about it. Nesta was 47 when she had her mastectomy. She didn't stop work then and she did other jobs for a bit, like cleaning in a school in Rhos and in a college, though this was before, when her children were small, and Nesta was 29. She contracted meningitis at one point, which developed after flu. She said she was working in the factory at Marchwiell at the time:

“I remember being in the factory at Marchwiell and I was feeling very thirsty and very giddy as if I was drunk and I came home on the bus. As I got off the bus I just fell in the doorway. They fetched the doctor. I just managed to get to the house door, fetched the doctor, and they took me straight to the hospital and they said I'd got meningitis virus. I had a lumbar puncture.”

Nesta was in isolation for six weeks and was off work for a couple of months. The factory kept her on and gave her sick pay. She went back for about twelve months and then they moved house again, to Crosslanes, where she worked in a hotel.

Recapping on the factories she'd worked in, the first one was the blanket factory in Llangollen; from there she went to Marchwiell (Wrexham Industrial Estate), where she worked first in Johnson & Johnson's Wrexham sanitary protection factory and then in Johnsons Fabrics across the road. She didn't really know what they made in the fabric factory, they just made gauze, she said she never wondered about what they made - “I never bothered to ask what they were making” - but she says the pieces of gauze were big, like net curtains. In this factory, her daughter thinks that Nesta's hearing was damaged by the noise of the looms and now she has an 'acoustic neuroma' in one of her ears, which is a small tumour that a specialist she has seen said could be caused by noise. Nesta wears an hearing aid. There was no protection against the noise of the looms at all.

In 1953, Nesta gave up work for three years while she had her children and then she returned to work, to the same factory, Johnson's Fabrics. She was in this factory for about seven years before going to Hunts, from the brickyard where she packed bricks for about four months “wheeling them along.” Hunts was also in Marchwiell, where they made the winding units for aeroplane. She says she was in Hunts for about a year then went to Filmcap in Rhosymedre but its possible that these are one and the same, as earlier Nesta said she went from Hunts to the ceramic factory. Or they could be two different factories!

“Called Filmcap it was, and I had the same work as Hunt's, so I went there, and when I got there, one of the bosses that was in Hunt's was there, so that's how I got the job there. He remembered me, you know.”

Nesta says she never went to a job centre to get her jobs, just went to the place and asked for one. She said she and a friend, Pam, went to ask for a job at the ceramics place and Pam didn't get the

job because she didn't know anything about the work. **“But I got the job because I knew the production manager.”**

57:15 She's always worked around the Wrexham area. The last job she had was cleaning in the school. When asked why she changed jobs so frequently, Nesta said it was to do with children and the illnesses. She has enjoyed her factory work, particularly Johnsons Fabrics - which she always called 'the big factory' , even though the hours were long and she worked shifts - 8am to 2pm and 2pm to 10pm, and she had to get up early and start out early in the morning to get the bus in. She only did shift work while her children were small, and she and her husband alternated, doing opposite shifts while the other was with the children.

Usually her wages went up with each job but sometimes she went just so to have a job. If she heard there was more money in a place, she'd go for the children's sake. Outside of work, she used to go the pictures and for walks, never had TV, so used to listen to the radio or read. Once you had children, she said **“You didn't have much pleasure for yourself, to go somewhere, you know, till they were older, and then I used to go out with my husband to different places, you know.”**

Later they had a touring caravan and they took the children to places like Rhyl and Anglesey. They had a factory fortnight at summer; at Christmas just the usual days or a week, though she wasn't sure exactly, and the bank holidays.

She had a bonus sometimes, she thinks, and said they used to get good money really. At Filmcap she used to work Saturday mornings and nights too. At the time she did nights, her two eldest children were working and only the youngest was still in school. When asked if she liked doing nights Nesta said she nearly fell asleep sometimes on the winding machine but she didn't mind it as it was a bit more money for nights. The staff on nights used to bring in their own food as the canteen wasn't open; once a co-worker called Bronwen put a tin o soup in one of the ovens used to heat the units, and she didn't pierce it so it blew up and there was soup all over them. The night foreman covered for them, taking the ruined units outside and burning them (related offtape.)

In Filmcap, they had a celebration for Open Day (?), and she didn't drink but they had a lot of drinks laid out and one of the girls brought her three glasses of what she thought was lemonade. The barman also worked at the factory and he was giving the girls drinks and putting vodka in them. One of the other girls had to take her home as she was too drunk to get the bus. Nesta and her husband had children and were living with her mother at the time.

Filmcap also had a big do in the Bryn Howell Hotel, Llangellen, where everything was free for the workers. Johnsons Fabric used to take their workers on trips to Blackpool, laying on buses, and Nesta loved the fair. The company paid for dinner when they got there as well. Nesta can't remember if the workers could take their husbands and wives with them. She's not sure how many years this happened but said it was marvellous.

She can't remember any Christmas parties at the factories, though the Bryn Howell might have been one. They had a lovely five course meal and there was dancing - they opened up the floor.

The last factory she worked in was the ceramic factory, after she had her breast off. She was aged 47. She did other work after this but not in a factory.

Duration: 1 hr 10 minutes