

## LLEISIAU O LAWR Y FFATRI / VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR

### Hotpoint, Llandudno (1979-1998)

**Interviewee:** VN037 Margaret Evans

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

Margaret confirmed her name, address and date of birth, 24<sup>th</sup> December 1940

Margaret was born in Llandudno, of a Welsh mother and an Irish father, and she went to school in Llandudno leaving school at fifteen and working first in Woolworths. She began working at Hotpoint in 1979 and finished in 1998. A month before her 15<sup>th</sup> birthday, her father was killed. He was a window cleaner and he fell, so there was just her and her mother left. **They were struggling financially and so Margaret decided to leave school at Easter and get a job. She was an only child and her mother worked part time.** When she was still in school she worked in a café. After leaving school, as well as Woolworths she also worked in Asda in the mid-70s, from 9am-3pm and earned £24 a week. She went to Hotpoint for more money.

**When she started at Hotpoint, she worked from 7.30am to 4pm and she earned £70 and more a week. "The money was an incentive, with having four girls." She got married in 1962 when she was 21. She carried on working because her mother lived with her and her husband and Margaret got a part time job while her mother looked after the children. "I'd be in work, she'd be home, there was always somebody home with the children."** Her husband was a roofer at the time. When she started in Hotpoint, her children were aged between 6 and 16.

Margaret was aged 39 when she went to Hotpoint. She got the job because her husband had left roofing and gone to Hotpoint in 1978 because the money was good and the hours and treatment were better. Her husband told her they were taking people on at the factory so she decided to try for a job there a year later. She filled in a form and went for an interview "and it did help you if you had family in Hotpoint so they could vouch for you, plus my niece and her husband had worked there for years." She went to training school, in the factory, on the Monday she started and her foreman, Ed Thomas, didn't think ladies should be in the factory. **"I'd watch these lads put the screws in, and they were just pretending, and I'm going right home and taking them out and thinking, well, they're not doing that. So he said 'you're very slow' so I said 'well, I'm doing what you told me, I'm putting the screws in and taking them out,' well I wasn't going to say 'well, they're not doing the job.' So I persevered for a week and he came and said 'You've only just passed.'"** The men were cutting corners, they 'knew the tricks of the trade' according to

**Margaret.** There were two other women on her training week but the rest were men.

Margaret never realised what factory work was before going to Hotpoint but she enjoyed it. She started working on the Mezz floor - the factory was split level - on the M line, where she stayed for 12-15 months. After this she applied for nights, as her husband was nights too at that time, so they were home when the children came home from school. Margaret was on nights for four years and after this she came down onto the shop floor. **The money was fantastic for night work, it was 8.30pm to 7am, and money was treble what the day shift was. When she started she was on days and she earned £76 the first week, as she'd started a fortnight before the summer holidays, she they'd factored that in.** For the two holidays a year, the workers used to get double pay - i.e. at Christmas they got a week off and got two weeks pay, in the summer, they got two weeks holiday and four weeks pay. So Margaret's first pay was £76 and she'd only worked three days. On the night shift, she earned nearly £100 a week. If you were working nights around the holiday time in the summer, you earned £400 - £200 for the week, and the same for the holiday.

*12.20* When she started there, the manager was a man named Shreiber and he really looked after the workers, said Margaret. He had 'brilliant ideas' and when he left, new management came in and the 'perks' began to disappear, for instance the company wanted to buy the profit share from the workers but a co-worker advised Margaret not to go down that route, so she kept hold of hers. But the new company diminished the profit share anyway so the workers didn't get as much as they had previously. Profit share was the profit they'd made on sales throughout the year and this would go to the workers. They didn't have to apply for this, it was automatic. The company paid sickness pay too. If a worker was a good/bad time keeper, however, this would affect the rate of pay they got if they were off sick. Some workers knew how to play this system however. If you were a bad time keeper, you might just get statutory sick pay because the year was a rolling year, not fixed. And if a worker had had a lot of time off, it would affect their sick pay the next time they were off.

Margaret's job was building motors for washing machines at first and then she moved down to the wiring. She became a team leader on the wiring boards where they made the harnesses for the washing machines. She found it relatively easy to pick up the work, even though she'd never worked in a factory before, except for a short spell in the ice-cream making factory where her mother worked. However, she said the work got harder towards the end because the workforce was diminishing, they were laying people off and putting more work on the people who were left. On the wireboards, they were static boards at first then they put them on a carousel, which meant it was more complicated, as the wires all had to go to different areas, and if they took one girl out the others had to work harder. **She had a word with one of the managers "You stand there and see if you can do it, I'm telling you that will not work, not the way you're allocating the wires."** She had loads of rows with the managers over the way they were trying to make the girls work in an unworkable way. The girls knew how the wires went and they knew it couldn't be done the way the management wanted them to do it.

On Margaret's line, they were all girls except for two lads who used to do the maintenance although in the end, she said, the girls ended up doing their own maintenance, fixing them themselves. There were about 12-14 girls on these carousels. **The working relationship was good, they used to have a good laugh, have parties on the Mezz floor, each of them bringing stuff in. "I always remember we used to have our Christmas party on the Mezz floor, taking over the boards."** The Llandudno Junction workers got transferred to another Hotpoint factory in Kinmel, in the October, at the start of the 1990s, when the factory closed down. At Christmas time, the Llandudno girls carried on having these parties and the girls in the factory told them they couldn't do things like that, have parties on the production line. **"There was them and us, when we went to Kinmel, there was them and us, we never amalgamated as such."** Kinmel was part of Hotpoint but the Llandudno Junction factory closed. Kinmel was a 35 minute bus ride

away. Margaret didn't want to go and it was 1992, when the factory closed completely, was when she finally had to go. They were transferring workers bit by bit but she 'dug her heels in.' She said Kimmel didn't have the same family atmosphere that the factory in the Junction had. "I think Kimmel resented Junction."

Her and her husband went to work at the Junction by car at first and then decided to go by bus as it was easier; when they went to Kimmel, there was a bus but it was easier to go by car. At Kimmel, she worked 39 hours a week, but could do overtime on Saturday morning, which was time and a half, and there was double time on Sunday. **Margaret often did overtime for the money.** If there was a big order, they'd often be asked to do overtime every night of the week and on Saturday morning. A lot of people wanted overtime for the money.

**23.00 The work was hard and they were mostly on their feet all day. There were chairs but Margaret said you were usually too busy to sit down. The line was continual and on their line, she had to make sure the racks were full of wires so the girls could keep going, so she was back and fro with the wiring to the racks.** The only time she sat down was at break times - a five minute break at 8.30am, 9.10 was a tea break, 10.30 was another five minute break. These five minutes were toilet breaks as the company found it easier to schedule in toilet breaks than have workers asking if they could be excused all the time. Lunch breaks were staggered - 11.30, 12.30 and 1.30 because there were so many people working there. Towards the end, they cut down on the afternoon breaks and the workers finished at 4pm

Margaret often used to take her own food in as the queues in the canteen were 'horrendous' and she used to sit and eat in the tea areas that were on all the floors. It wasn't ideal because their line might be on a break but the other lines would still be going so it was very noisy and the press office never stopped. But it was still easier to sit in the tea area than queue up "because by the time you queued up in the canteen, your dinner'd be gone." There were coffee machines on the factory floor and they also used to take tea bags and get hot water from the machines to make tea.

Health and safety "didn't exist really" said Margaret but you got used to the noise. **The company did get them some ear plugs which were like 'pear drops' and not very effective.** "I've got a few of them floating around and I always find the kiddies picking them up cos they're in the shape of a pear drop." **They didn't chat while they worked but shouted "You couldn't have a quiet conversation, you had to shout."** They talked about "What we were doing the night before, where we were going, who you were going with, any gossip. A lot of the girls in Hotpoint I grew up with." Some workers came in from places like Llanrwst, Bethesda, Penmaenmawr, Blaenau Ffestiniog. **There were a lot of younger girls there and the relationship between them and older workers like Margaret was fine. "In all fairness, everybody looked out for each other, and the older ones were more like mother hens, you know, there was always someone who'd say 'what's up, what's the matter with you? Oh, we'll sort it out.' Everybody looked after each other."** If someone saw somebody struggling, they'd help them out.

There was a target to do and there was one lady who would always call out "25 in hand" and this is how the workers remembered her when she died. '25 in hand' means that, if they had a hundred to do, this person would do 125, hence '25 in hand.' "And we'd say, oh, it's alright, we've got 25 in hand here." Part of Margaret's job was to go round at the end of the day and see if the girls had met their targets. If they hadn't done their quota, they had to give a reason. **She was a line manager and she got this job when she came down to the shop floor on days. She had no interest in being a line manager but there was a vote for a union and they put her forward as union rep - "Oh, go on, you can speak on our behalf." So she became union rep first, 'coerced into it, on the factory floor. Then, when she moved from the wiring to the other side where they set up the 'combo' she was called into the office one day and they asked her if she'd like to be a team**

**leader 'just to make sure everything's alright' and Margaret thought that if that was all it was, she'd give it a go. "But some of the girls got put out cos I didn't tell them what was happening, cos I didn't know myself." She explained to them that she didn't know herself, that she was asked to do it, and it all passed over.**

30.13 If a worker hadn't reached their quota, their wages wouldn't be docked, as long as they hadn't held up the line. "The girls would stick another couple in and say, oh, I've done hundred and two today. And that two would carry on so they were never out of wiring." Each machine had different wiring, referred to by numbers, e.g. 1828. So they'd have x amount of wires for line 1828. **Margaret was paid about 35p an hour extra for being a team leader, or thereabouts, she can't remember exactly but it wasn't very much. She didn't get paid for being a union rep.**

**As a union rep, she had to relay any changes by the management to the workers. For instance, there was a lot of unrest when they were being transferred to Kimmel and Margaret had to tell them "well, this is what's going to happen" and so on. "What you've got to realise at the end of the day is it's a job. But you've got to adhere to what they're going to do, this factory's going to close, it's not going to be here forever."** There was a lot of resentment over the move but the workers from the Junction were 'kept together' after the move.

In Llandudno Junction, the works were split into four lines according to the type of machine produced - the 1828, the Combo, the L3 and tumble dryers. The factory made washing machines, tumble dryers and dishwashers and they went all over the country. The factory was 'mucky' because of all the oil, the fumes, the forklift trucks, and the stacker trucks were going back and fro between the lines and the drivers often couldn't see very well due to the amount of stuff stacked on them, so the workers had to keep their eyes open and watch out. It could be very dangerous, she said, and she witnessed accidents, people being hit by a truck or trapped in a machine. "Today, they probably wouldn't get away with it." If there was an accident, there was a first aider there and also the factory had a nurse. A doctor, Dr Grout, was also there two or three times a week. **The workers also had medicals and when Margaret went for hers, during her training week, they found out she had a lump, she knew she had it anyway, but hadn't got it checked out. But the doctor told her to get it sorted and Kathy Smith, HR, (VN023) also had a word with her made her promise to go to her family doctor. It proved to be benign. She was off for two weeks.**

If anyone was hurt on the factory floor, it was recorded in an accident book, and if it was serious there was compensation. Despite the oil and the dust, the women only wore overalls, smocks or a coat, which was supplied by the factory, as well as trousers and jackets. The workers had a couple of these and would wash them at home. They were also supplied with boots.

38.38 The managers on the whole were good and would have a chat with the workers. A lot of them she knew personally anyway and they could all take a joke, apart from one. **They used to stick 'tails' on them as they walked down between the lines when they came with the wage slips on a Thursday and they'd be oblivious. On Grand National day they'd have a sweep in the factory and one year she played a joke on one of the managers, a quiet man who didn't chat as much as some of the others, and gave him a horse called 'April Fool' for a pound, which wasn't a horse at all, but the man didn't see the funny side. There was a lot of this sort of thing. One of the male workers was going to south Africa to live and they gave him a spear as a going away present. If someone was getting married or having a 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, they'd play tricks on them. Her daughter was working there at one point and when she was getting married, her co-workers dressed her up and painted her face with lipstick and she had to go home like that, but when she got home, the water had been cut off in the street and she couldn't wash. "If it was a happy time, you knew you were going to have a good laugh, if you were down, you'd go to work and your spirits would lift, it was unbelievable cos everybody was for**

**one another.”**

Things did change when they went to Kinmel even though they tried to keep it going, the family side of it wasn't there, as the factory was so big. **Margaret used to take the payslips around to the lines and that was the only time she came into contact with some of them, as there were a couple of hundred of them.** By that time, the wages were going direct into the workers bank accounts but she used to take the payslips round. They'd changed from wages to bank already in the Junction.

The workers in Hotpoint used to have collections if a worker had suffered a tragedy, or for a funeral, and Margaret, as section leader and union rep, lost count of the number of funerals she attended to represent the company. If someone died in section, not everyone would be able to go but a certain number would be allowed to attend.

**As a union rep, she says she 'wasn't very well liked with the management ' as she'd argue with them and stand up for the workers, for instance, if they wanted to sack someone. “There was one chap they tried to sack and I said I wasn't having it. I said, 'you were spying on him.' They were trying to say he was going down for his breaks earlier than what he was.” Margaret defended him and accused them setting a precedence on one man. “That's just one incident, but there was a particular young lady and the lads had complained about her BO. And Johnny Maddox, he's fairly matter of fact, and he says 'I'm going to so-and-so' and I said 'No you don't, John. I'll talk to her. You don't go near her' cos I could imagine what he'd say to her. So I took her in and I said to her 'Have you a problem?' So she went 'My washing machine's broke.' 'So why haven't you said anything before? Leave it with me, I'll try and see what we can do.' Anyway, I went to see Mr Maddox and he sent one of the engineers, one of the lads, to fix it for her. He (Maddox) would have said 'you stink' but once we'd got to the root of it, she changed completely. Well, she had a family, she was trying to struggle and that.”**

Johnny Maddox (one of the managers) had his good points, he used to send mince pies to the pensioners at Christmas. At Christmas, the children of the workers had presents suitable to their age. The younger ones toys and the older ones tickets for a disco. The factory did look after the workers she said.

Re the sacking issue, going early for a tea break more than once would be a sacking offence, as would trying to leave early at the end of the day, before the hooter went. There was a line that they all had to stand behind in order to go out at the end of the day and the managers would watch that nobody stepped over it before the official leaving time and the bell went. **If a worker took a packet of washing powder out, they were sacked for it, which some were. Everyone was allowed the perk of a big box of washing powder (a week?), so by taking another packet which they weren't entitled to, they were daft in Margaret's opinion.** If a worker faced a sacking offence, the company gave them the option to resign and if they did, they'd get a reference. If they didn't take it, they'd be sacked, there was no option to appeal and no reference. **If a worker in her union was guilty of a sacking offence, she'd be involved in her role as union rep; if they belonged to the TG union, she wouldn't. She was rep in the AU union.**

She doesn't think she's ever lost anybody's job or whether she's ever saved anybody's job. She did like being a union rep sometimes, she says “It was quite easy, the only time we got involved was if they were thinking of downing tools, if they didn't think they were getting a fair crack of the whip.” This happened over pay rises and when the profit shares went down. On these occasions, Margaret would talk to the workers and try and look for a way round it. There was a 'fighting fund' where a worker paid so much a week, and during a strike, if they hadn't paid into the fighting fund, they wouldn't get the £95 a week the fund entitled them to, with no tax or insurance to pay. Margaret

wanted the workers to donate a pound a week to this fund and they collected a few thousand pounds into the fund, but then it went to a vote and they came out on strike and they didn't get the £95 (?) **She was a union rep until about 3 years before she left. "The lads didn't think I was representing them enough, cos I went onto the line then."** She remained team leader. As union rep, she used to go to Bangor to meetings but not further afield.

In 1998, she left the factory. In Kimmel, it had got to the point where she hated going to work, and in the new factory there wasn't the same fun there'd been in the Junction. Her husband had also had a heart attack in 1997. So she used to say to the manager "any redundancies, put my name top of the list" and he used to laugh but eventually he said to her "You're there!" So she took redundancy. She had presents but no leaving party as it was difficult to have a party when so many were leaving at the same time. Her husband returned to work after his heart attack and stayed another five years.

Margaret is still in touch with many ex-colleagues "You go into Asda and you say 'Oh, it's like Hotpoint in here.'" She doesn't regret working while her children were growing up as the majority of the time her mother was at home looking after them. She had no problem working around the family. She told her daughter about a job there and her daughter also got her husband, who'd been a landscape gardener, a job there. Looking back she says the friendship in the Junction is what she missed most, the job no. **"I would never knock Hotpoint because it gave me my life, gave me my house, cars, holidays, and the kids a good upbringing. No, I couldn't knock them. It's a shame there's no industry like that round here now for the kids cos they'll never have what we had."**

Duration : 1 hour