

LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI / VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR

Laura Ashley, Carno and Newtown (1967-1991)

Interviewee: VN041 Glenys Hughes

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

Glenys confirmed her name, address and date of birth as 07/01/1948

Glenys was born and brought up in Trefeglwys, her father worked for the council and her mother was a housewife who did odd jobs. She has an older sister and a younger brother. She went to school in Trefeglwys and Llanidloes, leaving at the end of the autumn term in 1962. **The following January she turned fifteen but she'd already got a job in a factory on the 27th December. So she was fourteen when she began work.**

Her first job was in a sewing factory in Newtown. She feels she had to leave school and get a job and she was only average in school anyway. She can't remember how she got this job, but she does remember travelling there on her first day, as she got a lift in with a man who lived in Trefeglwys and it was snowing and they arrived late because they got stuck in the snow. She can't remember much about her first day except that she was very nervous, as she was very shy as a young girl. "I should have been born when I was forty and I'd have plenty to say."

The factory made pyjamas and she was on three months probation when she started. Her first wage was £2 19 and 6 a week and it went up to £3 seven and six after three months. She was still living at home. She hadn't been sewing before so she had training when she started and she quite liked it. **"But I think sometimes you can get into a rut and that's what happened to me."** She was in this Newtown factory about five years and the factory was called the Universal Shirt Company, even though it was making pyjamas. They were young girls, older girls in their late teen and much older women working there, all women on the factory floor, and there was a male mechanic there too. They sat in rows of machines and there was a canteen there but you had to take your own food and tea or coffee. She thinks her hours were 8am to 5pm and there was no shift work. They had an hour for lunch. She kept on having a lift with this man and when he wasn't going, she'd cycle to Caersws and catch the bus to Newtown. Eventually she drove.

She thinks she picked the work up quite easily but can't really remember. She did pyjamas pretty much the whole time, doing various parts of the garment. To start off, she thinks she was put on

something easy. She didn't think anything of the work but says she couldn't have been very ambitious. **Going into the factory and working with a load of girls was 'nerve racking' at the beginning she said, but it was alright after a while.** The girls were quite nice she thinks and she did make friends there. "Over life, you make friends, but your life changes and you lose them, don't you. There's only certain amount that are friends forever." When she finished, she was earning about £9. **She can't remember how she spent her wages "On myself I would have thought" though she did give some money to her mother for her keep. "I think that's right anyway because it gives you a bit of responsibility in life, doesn't it."** She lived at home the whole time she was there and has always lived at home really, as she cared for her mother in later years.

She left the factory in Newtown to go to work in Laura Ashley **"I thought about it for a while, as I'm not very good at decision making, but it was probably the best decision I ever made at the time."** She began in Tŷ Brith, which she says was the original Laura Ashley factory in Carno. When asked why she didn't look for work in Laura Ashley when she left school, instead of going to Newtown, she thinks she probably didn't even know it existed then. She had an interview for the job in Laura Ashley, after the factory had closed for the day, and she had to make an apron. One person interviewed her, who she thinks was called Tony. The apron was already cut, with a bib on, and she had to make it up, following the example of one there already made up. She can't remember how long it took to do this. She thinks she must have been very nervous but she got the job and she began on October 9th 1967.

9.00 The factory was nice she says, and there wasn't many girls there at the time. It was small compared to the factory in Newtown, which was huge. **Her wages at Laura Ashley were £9 17 and 6d. So there was about 10s difference, which she says was lot then.** She thinks the factory also paid travelling costs but later said that this was probably much later when the factory moved to Newtown. They did put a bus on for the workers she said, as the employees came from all over the surrounding area. She began on tea towels and aprons, and she doesn't think they were doing clothes at the time. She remembers Mo Lewis working there (VN002) and her sister Rosina Corfield, who was a supervisor. Rosina was one of the first people to work for Laura Ashley and was a very good supervisor, says Glenys.

The work she began doing was hemming the sides of the tea towels, on the one factory floor, in a one story building. She thinks some of the printing had already gone up to the second factory. She doesn't remember any pressure **"It was a pleasure to go in for the first couple of years. I suppose it was just a nice atmosphere there, working with nice people."** She knew one or two of the workers there before she started. The day to day routine was pretty much the same as in the pyjama factory, a break in the morning and again in the afternoon, **but now she had half an hour for lunch "which was brilliant because what do you do for an hour? It's just a waste of time especially in Carno."** There was a little canteen for tea and coffee and she took sandwiches in. They often went outside to eat their lunch. Glenys drove in to work.

Outside of working hours she used to go out with friends from round and about. She could afford holidays. She was there for about 24 years in the factory. She saw many changes and says "it grew so quickly I'm amazed it survived." This was after it started doing garments. She worked in all three of the Carno factories and also in the Newtown factory. **She was a supervisor at one time and didn't find the transition from the factory floor to supervising very difficult.** She didn't have to inspect the garments, as they went to an inspection place. There were a number of supervisors at the time each responsible for their lines of machinists. She was doing office work at this time, having started on tea towels, moved on to garments, been a supervisor and then was doing something in payroll. "I wasn't on the factory floor much eventually, because they were on piecework and I was doing the, I wasn't doing the payroll but I was doing the pay for each girl, what

they'd done every day, that sort of thing. I still refer to it as a supervisor but the work tickets came in every day and I went through them.” Work tickets related to piecework but she says she can't remember details. She says it was quite easy in the early years but as time went on the factory went on to proper time and motion piecework.

She doesn't think there was ever a strike in Laura Ashley but she does remember, in the good days, that a union told the workers in one of the factories that they were already earning more than they could get them. “But I do remember, when there were (national) strikes and there was no electric, in the 70s was it? Yes, I can remember that, and they were doing ready packages of I think it was children's' garments ready to sew and we were going in and packing those.” She remembers working there in the cold at that time, as there was no heat, although the factory didn't keep going 100%

20.00 Glenys says she has never been in a union in her life. “I don't think it did me any harm not to be, it probably wouldn't have done me no harm to be, would there? I just thought 'well, I'm quite happy as things are.'” Disagreements or complaints would be sorted out among themselves. “There's always a way to sort things out, isn't there?” She can't remember if her job as supervisor involved any mediating between the workers and the management.

Glenys says she was there far far too long “The company I left wasn't the company I started with.” She supposes some things must have changed for the better. As regards health and safety, she says “it didn't come into it” but **there were occasions when a machinist would have a needle through her finger. This happened to her in Newtown “I thought to myself afterwards there was such a fuss made for no need.”** On those occasions, the finger would be trapped and they'd have to unscrew the needle, take the whole thing out, and pull the needle out. A worker probably wouldn't carry on working that day and the incident would be recorded. **There was a nurse on site, in the later days.** She can't remember any big accidents in places like the packing area and dyeing house.

The men worked in the printing department, stencilling, putting the dye onto the material in patterns. The relationship was 'marvellous' between the men and the women, she says, and there was a lot of fun in the early days. **There weren't many workers' nights out, however, and she can remember going to one or two evenings that had been organized and hardly anybody turning up but still 'having a wonderful time.'**

There was a Christmas party but she can't remember if they got a bonus at Christmas. Neither can she remember any trips organized by the factory. **She did go on a plane trip to Holland, with two other girls, as there was room on the Ashley plane. If the plane was going anywhere and there was room, they'd take some of the workers.** The plane went from an airfield near Shrewsbury. The workers would have to get themselves to Shrewsbury but the plane trip was free. She doesn't remember very much about the Holland trip.

Glenys was goalkeeper in the Laura Ashley football team and she remembers playing in Wormwood Scrubs against the shop girls, why they won. “We always won, I don't know why, it was nothing to do with me.” They'd play locally most of the time and she doesn't remember them playing for charity or for money. She was involved in the Laura Ashley 'It's a Knock Out' too.

27.55 They wore their own overalls on the factory floor, with pockets to keep their scissors and various things. They sat down all day at the machine and says they didn't think about things like repetitive strain. But she says it wasn't that strict in the early years and you could always get up and to to the toilet for a walk. **“What really really annoyed me were cigarette breaks. That really annoyed me as a non-smoker because I thought I should, if I worked there all my life, I thought I should finish two years early for all the cigarette breaks I didn't take. And I've**

never been anti-smoking, it doesn't bother me whether people smoke or not, but that really annoyed me. I don't know if they abused it but they had a tea break and in between a cigarette break, which I thought was scandalous. But then some non-smokers would go with them and you couldn't say 'no,' could you.” A lot of people smoked in those days and there was an area for smoking in the newer factory and a place outside in the original factory.

She left after twenty four years **“I asked for redundancy, cos I hated it so much, and I was really annoyed when they gave it me. I couldn't go there a day longer.”** This was in Newtown and Glenys said she couldn't stick it, not so much the work, but the attitude. She finished in the beginning of December and started soon after in another factory in Newtown. She can't remember how old she was leaving Laura Ashley but she worked for several years afterwards, in total she worked for about 45 years in sewing factories. She retired at 60.

She enjoyed what she did 'up to a point.' She says of Laura Ashley “It was just a nice company to work for probably for half the time I was there and then it changed. But I do think it's easy to get into a rut, and that's no disrespect for the company or anything else, probably it's down to me. People change, and the environments change, and everything changes.”

Regarding starting work in a factory so young she says “I suppose that's just what you did, you got on with it.” She still does some sewing, altering clothes for herself for instance, but only if she has to and the less she does the better. For a time she did sewing for other people but doesn't want to do that any more. She has a sewing machine but not one from Laura Ashley as she never had room for one.

Duration : 40 minutes