

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

**Sweets Factory, St Asaph (c. 1952-1954)**

**Interviewee: Joyce Alice Edwards**

**Date: 17: 06: 2014**

**Interviewer: M. Grant on behalf of the Women's Archive of Wales**

### **1. Background:**

*Name:* Mrs Joyce Alice Edwards

*Date of Birth:* 10/07/1935

*Tell us a little about your background - where you were born and about your father and mother...*

I was born on a farm on the Lower Denbigh Road in St Asaph. My father was a farmer. My mother was a housemaid before she married my father, but then being a farmer's wife she had enough to do at home, so she didn't do anything out of the farm, but she did a lot of work there. I was the eldest of five, although I did have a brother older than myself but he was a spastic and he died when he was seven.

Being the eldest on the farm you had to muck in and help with everything. I learnt to drive a tractor before I knew what tractors were, I think. My father had to have somebody to help him. Great family life, even through the war, I enjoyed it, I don't know whether they did. Except for looking after the children, because my mother had twins, two girls and then two years later she had another girl so it was like triplets and I was always the dog's body who had to look after them. Make sure they got their shoes on, their coats on, take them for a walk. I always said I would never have children of my own, but I ended up with two sons in the end. You do change your mind, don't you?

*Which school would you have gone to?*

St Asaph Infants, then the VP, then St Asaph Grammar (it's the Welsh school now).

*You passed the 11plus?*

I did, yes and I stayed there until I was nearly fifteen. My father was diagnosed with cancer of the spine and he couldn't manage what he was doing, he was still carrying on, but he couldn't manage the harvest. I had to stay at home and help him. They decided I could go back in the week of the exam, and I'd missed the whole term, I just wouldn't go back for an exam that I didn't know anything at all about. I dug my heels in a bit there and I wouldn't go back to school at all. So I got myself a job instead.

I had a job in a grocer shop on the Row (in St Asaph) for two years, and it was after that that I went to the factory, and I think I was there two years. I'm only approximate because it was a long time ago and I can't remember all the dates.

I know when I moved from the factory because they moved to Prestatyn and it was a long journey. I got a job in the milk bar in St Asaph then until I was twenty one. From then on I went to the hospital, I worked in the dining room, in the nurses' home and then in the sisters' home and I ended up as the canteen supervisor when they turned it into a canteen there. And then I got married!

[3' 30'''] **2. Work**

*Your first job after leaving school was?*

The grocery shop.

*How did you get that job?*

My mother used to deal with that shop. In those days, during the war, you couldn't just go anywhere you had ration books and that, Miss Gagon's was one of the shops that my mother dealt with and she wanted an assistant, so I was given the post. It was a behind the counter assistant and the delivery boy at the same time. I had to take the orders around and the bread. I had a lady's bike with a big basket, not a bike like the boys had, the errand boys had, but I could take quite a load, one house at a time, of course. I didn't mind that because I loved cycling, unless it rained.

*When did you start in the factory?*

I wasn't getting much wages from Miss Gagon, the money was very poor. By the time I'd given my mother some, all I had left was about two pounds, if I had that much. I know I didn't have anything much. Some friends who worked there, they told me about there and how much they were getting. I have this vague recollection there was a sum of around ten pounds a week. Of course you did more hours, but you had the week end off, you wouldn't have to work on Saturday. To me, ten pounds seemed like a fortune. So I went there to ask for a job, saw the boss and he said, start on Monday and there you are.

*Any interview?*

Well, a vague interview, he did ask me my name, and how old I was. I don't think it was much more.

*Did you need qualifications?*

No, not that kind of job.

*What did the factory make – the end product?*

Spearmint Chews and lollipops for the summer people, the holidaymakers, that kind of shops. The Spearmint Chews you had to wrap and the lollies you just twisted a piece of paper round, that wasn't much.

*What about the making?*

They had two men in the back who made them. But there was a side effect from that because there were no doors between the back and the main room where we were, and the acid, in the lollies at least, got into my fingers. It would build up like a boil, I had to break it and clean it and put a plaster on it and carry on until one got on this hand, underneath the nail. I didn't know what to do with that, so I went to the doctor.

She had me sitting in the chair and she said what's happening over there, so I turned to look, and while I was looking she put a scissors down my nail and pulled it off. I was on the floor when she finished. No freezing or anaesthetic, nothing. She was right, it had to come out, but I didn't really expect that. Perhaps it would have been worse if she'd told me what she was going to do; she might have been chasing me around the surgery. But that was one side effect of the acid floating through the air. I don't know if other people suffered with it, but I know I did.

*Your work was wrapping in the factory?*

Yes, wrapping, wrapping, wrapping.

*How did you feel about working there?*

I didn't mind. We had a bit of camaraderie, and the girls weren't bad, they were good fun while you were working; except for the long hours. There was no messing about, you couldn't ...if you wanted to go to the loo, you had to go and come straight back again, no dawdling anywhere. He would have been shouting at you, because he had where the projectionist had been, above the vestibule at the front where you entered the old cinema, he was up there in his office. He was keeping an eye on you, you couldn't get away with anything. You had to keep your nose to the grind stone.

*How did other local people view working in a factory? What was the status of working in the factory?*

Well, just a case you had to work somewhere, and the pay wasn't bad. They all seemed quite happy there. If anybody had a real grudge I don't think they stayed, they just went and that was it – look for something else.

[9' 30''] **3. The job ...**

*Can you remember your first day at work? What were your first impressions?*

I must have been a bit scared, I should think. I was a bit quiet, even in school I was a quiet mouse, kept in the background all the time. I don't think I'd have been overjoyed being in that atmosphere to start with, because it was a little bit daunting so many other girls and a lot older than me some of them. He was a bit frightening, I don't mean that he scared you, but you wouldn't take any liberties, the kind of man you wouldn't take liberties with. I don't think I'd come across anybody, except schoolmasters, like that before. I think I would have been a bit daunted, but I don't really remember the first day. I just remember being there. It is a long time ago, isn't it?

*When are we talking about now?*

Well, say I was nineteen and I'm seventy nine now, so it's sixty years ago. So it is a long time to remember everything about it, I mean. I'm amazed I remember as much as I do.

*What did you do? Can you describe a working day?*

You'd go in and you'd go for some wrapping papers, boxes and you had a piece of table to yourself, you'd arrange your things. Then they'd be bringing the chews out and passing them along and you'd wrap and wrap as fast as you can and fill your boxes as fast as you can and that was it. It wasn't an inspiring job; it was a boring job really. But he did have a radio, you could hear some music, you could sing with the programmes, whatever they were. That did relieve the monotony a little bit. The girls would be talking amongst themselves.

There were three long tables in the room, a long thin room, and I was in the middle of the middle one, so I was right in the middle of everybody. It wasn't the kind of job you'd want to do for life, put it that way.

*How many other women worked there?*

I think at a rough guess it was about fifteen to eighteen, I'm sure there were at least five on each table, there might have been six.

*How many men worked there?*

Just the two.

*Did you change jobs at all while you were at the factory?*

I got the tidying of the storeroom added to my work because I was a tidy worker. It was a bit of a jumble in there because the girls used to just dive in and grab the papers and grab the boxes, drop things everywhere. I had to tidy all that up, but it made me slower than ever

because I wasn't very fast and I fell behind all the time. The girls were very good hearted and because I was doing that without complaining they used to help me out with a box so that I could finish the same time as them and go home.

*You had to do so many in a day?*

Yes, I've been trying to work that out, and I can't remember exactly, but I know it was more than I could cope with. Some of them could do more than that. I had a figure in my head that was forty five, and I'm sure that's not right, that's an awful lot of chews isn't it. Perhaps it was twenty five and I got the four wrong. You certainly had a target every day. Unless, of course, the machine broke down, they had to take that in account; that happened sometimes. They'd mix the mixture in big bowls, big tins in the back and then they had a machine that pressed the chews out, like biscuits sort of thing. If something happened and the machine broke down well, they couldn't keep up with the chews for us to wrap. On those days you couldn't do your full quota so they had to make allowances for it. You can't help the machine breaking down can you? We couldn't help it; it was nothing to do with us. Cause a bit of a hassle that would. Knowing him he probably sent us home, I can't remember that happening, but I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he sent us home.

[15'] *You wouldn't say there were there skilled or semi-skilled and unskilled jobs?*

No, everybody was the same, of the girls anyway. I suppose the men were skilled in what they were doing. No, the girls were just workers really.

*Were you offered any training to help you with the job?*

No, you just went in and learnt it as you went along. A wrap is a wrap, but you just had to go faster and faster all the time, as fast as you could. No, no training.

*Were there married women working there? Did they do the same jobs as the unmarried workers?*

Only one that I know of, and she hadn't been married long, she was just like one of the girls. No particular emphasis on it one way or the other, just one of the girls.

*Were you encouraged to go to night school to further your education or day release?*

No, I don't think they had it then did they? Did they have night school just after the war? I have a vague feeling that there was nothing like that. No, we weren't encouraged. It wouldn't have helped much if we'd gone I don't think.

[16' 30''] **4. Wages**

*Can you remember how much you were paid – per week / month?*

This ten pounds sticks in my brain, but like I say, it's sixty years ago. It must have been a good sum or I wouldn't have gone, I don't think.

*Did it depend on the number of boxes you did?*

Yes, it did.

*Did you have a pay rise at all?*

Don't recall one.

*How were you paid?*

Cash, in a brown envelope; on a Friday, as you were going home not before, in case you went home early.

*Did you know how much other workers were paid?*

I think we were all paid the same.

*What did you spend your wage packet on? Did you have to share your wages with your family?*

Oh, definitely, yes, I had to do that. I'd probably got three pound left and given seven pounds to my mother. I'd spend mine on stockings perhaps, a record occasionally. Go to the milk bar when the gang were there, all my friends, for a hot chocolate or something like that.

*Were there any perks for working in the factory?*

No, not really. Even if they offered you chews, I don't think I'd want them. After wrapping so many, I was sick of them. We'd never touch one.

*Would he have been worried about any pilfering?*

I never heard of any, no.

[18' 20''] **5. Trade Unionism**

*Were there any unions in the factory?*

No!

*Were there any disputes/ problems / strikes?*

No.

*Did you feel the workers were treated fairly?*

Well, I suppose so, in his fashion, you know. It could have been a lot worse. I'm sure there were worse bosses around.

*How did the workers get on with the management, with the owner?*

All right; some of them were braver than me and used to give him cheek now and again.

*Would people look up to, admire him or fear him?*

A bit of mixture of admiration and fear, I should think. Admiration for what he was doing, you know. He was getting on, wasn't he? He certainly had the get up and go, didn't he, to started Kwik Save. There was a lot of power behind him, a dynamic man, you felt it. He wasn't messing around, he knew what he was doing and he was going head first for what he wanted. That's fair enough, isn't it?

[20'] **6. Conditions:**

*Did you wear a uniform for work?*

No.

*Was the work dangerous in any way?*

Not for us really, no.

*Were there any accidents?*

No, not that I recall.

*Can you remember any of the rules and regulations that he might have had?*

No, not really, only be on time and work hard, that's about all I can remember.

*Were you ever made aware of health and safety issues in the factory?*

Never been thought of.

*How was the factory heated or well lit?*

Well, reasonably lit. I don't recall being frozen, so there must have been some heat there, but I couldn't tell you what. It wasn't the kind of building that would be naturally warm, I'm sure they had to bring some heat in. But then we never worked in the worst of the winter, because the chews we were producing and wrapping were summer sweets, so in the winter nobody wanted them. So he closed the factory down, and put us on the dole. So from say November 'till March, I suppose, depending on when Easter was, we'd be out of work. I was at home then, I would be warm there.

*You said you played music while you were working?*

He had a radio in the office and he could open the window and we could hear it through the window; didn't have speakers or anything but at least we could hear the music, singing with it and it kept you going.

*Was it very noisy on the factory floor?*

No, I don't think so. It could be now and again, depending on what the men were doing, but not a great noise, not the kind that would deafen you, not that bad.

*You were you allowed to chat while you were working?*

Yes, you were allowed to chat, as long as you didn't stop to chat.

*What did you usually talk about?*

Goodness knows, films, boys, I don't know, I can't remember.

*Would people have been allowed to smoke while working?*

No.

*Have you suffered any long term effects on your health from working in the factory?*

No, only the two dints in my legs from leaning on the iron bar, they don't hurt, it's nothing, just that they're there.

*Did the women workers tease the men or harass them?*

Oh, some of the bolder ones, yes. They'd have a chat and a laugh, yes, but they got as good as they gave.

*How did you feel about what they were doing this?*

Well, I don't think I took much notice.

*You didn't join in?*

Gosh no, that wasn't like me; too quiet. I think it's only in later life I've got cheeky.

[24'] **7. Hours / Holidays**

*How many days did you work per week?*

Five days.

*No Saturday?*

No.

*How many hours a day?*

It was eight till six, I think. It was quite a long day.

*No shifts?*

No, no.

*Did you clock in and clock off?*

Yes.

*Were you ever paid any overtime?*

Don't recall.



*Did you have any breaks during your working day?*

Half an hour for lunch, and that would be it.

*No morning or afternoon break?*

No, these things came later. It wouldn't have been any different in the shop, you wouldn't have had a break there either, only a lunch break.

*Would there have been a canteen there?*

No.

*You brought in your own food?*

Yes.

*During your lunch break did you stay there or go out?*

We seemed to hang around the porch, where our coats were and the clocking on machine was. If it was nice, outside on the steps, just to get out of the room.

*Was there facilities to make tea or coffee or heat your food?*

No.

*No annual holiday then?*

No, you'd have a great annual holiday at Christmas.

*What about Bank holidays?*

I can't remember. I just seem to think our weeks were all the same, but I couldn't swear to that.

*Did you go on holiday?*

No, I never went on holiday.

*Were you allowed days off for personal reasons? (funerals etc.)*

I don't know, it never came up with me. I don't remember anybody else. Perhaps he would have let you go, but I'm sure he would have docked your wages.

[26' 40'''] **8. Travel to work**

*How did you get to work?*

There, I walked.

*Was it far to travel? How long did it take you? When did you have to leave home?*

About twenty to eight; I think it's a good half mile, three quarters of a mile from home.

[27'] **9. Social Life**

*Were any social activities organised by the workers?*

No.

*Trips or outings?*

The only outing, Mr Gubay took us to the Chester Races one Friday evening; that's the only outing I associate with the factory.

*Did he pay for that, taking you there?*

Well, he paid for the transport, yes. I suppose he paid for us to go in, didn't he? Yes, he must have, I wouldn't have been able to afford it. I wouldn't have gone, but I did go. Yes, quite an event.

*That's the one event you remember in particular from your time in the factory?*

Yes. I don't like horse racing, but you have to take what's offered, don't you?

[29' 30''] **10. Did you enjoy working at the factory?**

Well, I think I did really. I didn't leave because I didn't like it. I left because they either purchased or had built a building on Marine Drive in Prestatyn and it was a big factory so they had plenty of room for everything; more up to date stuff than in the cinema. But the trouble was getting to work. By then he had a driver and I suppose what you call pantechnicon, a very big van, a great big van. He used to take us to work in that one. Well, you were rattling all over in the back, it was a horrendous drive. And also you'd got to start that much earlier, so your day got longer and longer.

The milk bar I used to go to, next door to the grocer shop that I used to work in, he wanted help in the milk bar, so I asked him would he take me on. So I went there and I could walk to work again; didn't have to have that horrible journey.

*How long did you actually work in the factory?*

Well, I think it's around two years, might be a little bit longer. I know I was still working for the milk bar when I was twenty one, and I'd been there a while then. I think I might have been seventeen when I started and about nineteen when I left.

*Did they give you a farewell party or farewell gift?*

No. I don't suppose he even noticed I'd gone.

*Are you in contact with any of your former workmates?*

No, not really. They were mostly from Rhyl, not many from St Asaph. The one I knew from St Asaph, who'd told me about it in the first place, she married somebody from Rhyl, so she's in Rhyl; so I never see her either.

*Looking back now – how do you feel about the time you spent working in the factory?*

Well, I suppose it was part of my growing up, a different milieu than I'd been in before. Always had a sort of sheltered life on the farm, sheltered in some ways, you learnt things about other things, but there are things that you miss not being out and about like the other children. I think I learnt to look after myself and get along with people. I don't regret it totally; it's part of life, isn't it.

At the time perhaps when I left school, after I left school, I was a bit sorry about it because I would have, I think, passed the right qualifications and I could have got to be a domestic science teacher. But even if I'd done that, passed them, my mother and father couldn't afford to send me to college, and you had to pay. So it wouldn't have worked anyway, would it?

And then I think, now looking back, I think at the time it seemed wrong and upsetting, but now it seems right all of it, because it's brought me on a path of life that got me my two sons that I think the world of and two lovely granddaughters. So you have to be grateful for small mercies, don't you?

*Well, I think that's a lovely place to finish. Thank you very much for sharing your experience of working in the sweet factory.*

You're very welcome.

Duration : 35 minutes