

LLEISIAU O LAWR Y FFATRI / VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR

Sewing Factory, Love Lane, Denbigh (1950 – 1962)

Interviewee: Eira Richards

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

1. Background:

Name: Mrs Eira Richards

Date of Birth: 22/ 01/ 1936

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

Yes, I was born in Holywell. My mum was from Holywell and my dad was from Llandyrnog and he worked on the railway and my mum, obviously not many worked in those days and she didn't. She had five children so she had enough to do, I think.

I was one of five, three brothers and one sister.

And did they work?

Yes, they all worked.

Which school would you have gone to then?

I went to the Secondary Modern in Denbigh, the Central School it was called then. My three brothers and my sister went to the Grammar School in Denbigh. As I'd been ill the last twelve months, I'd missed school again in the last twelve months, the doctor said, 'Don't let her take the exam to get to the Grammar School because it would be too much of a strain for her'. So I didn't, I didn't go, but the others all went.

How old would you have been leaving school?

I was just gone fourteen, about fourteen and a half, possibly, but it was fifteen we should have left.

How did you feel about leaving then?

I didn't mind at all, I was glad.

So would you have gone on to work then?

No, not straight away; I think I was getting on for sixteen when I was well enough to go to work.

[1' 50''] **2. Work**

What was your first job?

Sewing, in a factory – seamstress.

How did you get the job?

My mum was talking to a lady who lived next to and she had a daughter the same age as me, and I knew her (we used to play together when we were kids). She said her daughter was working in a little factory in Denbigh, sewing factory. My mum said, that would be ideal for her because she likes fiddling with sewing a lot. So she asked her how do we find about a job? She said, just go knocking on the door. So that's what we did. My mum came with me and she knocked on the door and explained to the lady. It was the cleaner that came to answer it, and she said, I'll get Miss Williams now to talk to you. She came down and called us in, and my mum told her about me not working earlier because I'd been ill and that I liked sewing. I was all excited at the thought of going to sew, it was something I did love, that was about all I liked. She said, 'Well, yes, we'll take her on, see how she goes and see how she likes it. Start on Monday.' This was the Wednesday when we went to see her, start on Monday. So that was it.

When did you start in the factory? What year would that have been?

Towards the late forties, I should think, 1950 maybe.

Did you want to work there?

Oh, yes, I wanted to work there. Once I knew about it. I didn't know the place existed no more than my mother did. Just happened that she was talking to this lady and asked where her daughter was, was she working anywhere.

Where was the factory in Denbigh?

Up Love Lane in Denbigh, it was an old school apparently, and it closed down. I think it was more like a small school. It was only a small place. They bought it and took it over. There wasn't many of us, there was only about twenty five of us working there actually. It was nice,

liked that – a nice small little place. It was a family firm that took it over, you felt that you were in the family, it was nice.

What did they actually make, what was the end product?

Clothes – coats, suits anything really, costumes. Usually coats more and costumes we did a lot of – costumes were very fashionable then.

For particular firms?

Yes, John Lewis's in Liverpool, and T. H. Hughes's in Liverpool, those were the only ones. We had enough work to keep us going all the year round, every year.

You said it was a friend who was working there who told you about it...

No, her mother. She was working there when I went there so it was nice, I knew her. Mind you being such a small place, I knew lots of people in Denbigh, they'd been in school with me or a few years older than me. So I knew most of the people who worked there when I went in there.

Did you need any qualifications?

No, nothing at all. They said, we'll show you what we want you to do. They had a girl there who'd been there years, she did the showing you what – the different things, the garments they did, how to sew them, how to use the machine. I used to sew by hand at home, no machine. I learnt that way.

There was an interview?

No, only when she came to the door, they called her down, there's somebody to see you, and she was sat in the kitchen. There was a kitchen down there, which must have been the kitchen for the school, I think. She made a cup of tea for my mum and she just talked with us there, and that was it. So I went in and came out with a job!

How did you feel about working there?

Oh, I thought it was fantastic. Especially the first day I went to work, because I started on the Monday. My mother was pleased I was working there, especially as I didn't have any qualifications like my three brothers and sister had, going to the Grammar school. She was a bit concerned what I would do.

How do you think other local people viewed working in a factory?

Nobody thought nothing of it. There were different types of people there. You didn't think, well you're in a factory. Factories were quite new in those days, I think, when I started. I enjoyed it all the time I was there. I stayed there until 1962 when my daughter was born. I stayed until I was six months and then I left to have her.

I couldn't go to Denbigh, there was a little factory in St Asaph sewing, where Ega Tube is now, and that was a firm doing baby clothes. So I managed to get a few hours there once she was old enough.

[8' 20''] **3. The job ...**

Can you remember your first day at work?

Yes, I do, yes. The room was huge and when I went there, there was rows of about thirty sewing machines there and they were all going. I noticed a lot of girls were waving to me, so I knew a lot of them that were there, that was nice, actually. They were all Denbigh girls, there was one from Bodfari and the others were Denbigh.

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

You had a pile – they'd cut the clothing out, they had somebody who did that. They bundled it up and they gave it to you and said they would like it done in three days or a week if it was something more difficult. Once I knew how to do them, after they'd shown me, you just got on with it. You did everything, the whole garment, from top to bottom. Buttonholes, I had to learn how to use the buttonhole machine; put the buttons on. Everything like that we had to do. We always hemmed by hand, the coats were always hemmed by hand. They didn't have the special ones they've got now for hems, we hemmed them all by hand. We did all that. When you finished it, you put it in an area at the top and they had a girl checking them that they were all right. If they weren't she brought it back and said, look we're not happy with that, can you redo that, but otherwise that was ok.

Can you remember how long your first one took?

Oh, it took me more than the three days, a lot more because I didn't want it to come back and start again. Because the thing is, if you took a long time to redo it, you may have it the following Monday still haven't finished it, so you'd get behind with starting the next one. So I found that a bit haunting really, so I took a while, I took the amount of time you were given to make sure it was all right. I never had one back so I was ok.

And you were trained on the job, somebody showed you

Yes, they showed us how to do it. And I thought, this looks hard, but it's funny, once you've done one you're all right. And the worse things we did do was gymslips for T. J. Hughes's, school ones, where they had the box pleat. Oh, those pleats, getting them right and pressing the garment at the end. You'd go down to the pressing room and there were these big pressers, you had to do all that yourself as well, when you finished. So you did actually do it from the very beginning, apart from cutting it out, you did the whole thing right to the end.

That must have given you a lot of job satisfaction.

I found that was good. Because some factories you just did hems maybe or collars, things like that, but this was different. It was a family place, and they were more that way. They did live in Liverpool at one time, they were from Dyserth originally and the father had the factory. He

started this factory in Liverpool. So they had these firms to do it when they were there, and then they decided they wanted to come back to Wales to work. They found this place and made it into a factory. So they had these shops who said, yes we'll still keep you.

You enjoyed your work?

I did enjoy it.

What did you enjoy about it?

I think it was the atmosphere there, with not being a big place and knowing all the girls, remembered them in school, and you could talk about your school days even though some of them were a little bit older. There was a lot of things like that.

Anything you didn't you enjoy?

No, not really. I can't think of anything I hated or wanted to leave there. I was sad to leave really.

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

No, but you did different garments, you got to know how to do different ones, but that was about all. No, you didn't change jobs. You either came there as a person who would check them over or sewing – that's what you did. You couldn't go any higher than that, once you did the whole thing.

How many other women worked there?

Round about twenty five. There was a lady who was the secretary who saw to our wages and that sort of thing.

Any men work there?

There was the one who cut out. He was with them in Liverpool and he came to Wales, because his wife was from Wales and he decided he'd come with them.

About how many people worked in the factory?

About twenty five.

Did this change at all during your time in the factory?

No, actually, when one was leaving to have a baby or something, or moving away from Denbigh, they had a list of names of people asking. They went by if you knew them; they'd give them an interview. If somebody knew them, I know somebody who'd like to work here they asked for names and addresses and that's how they got them. Everybody knew everybody all the time.

There weren't any skilled or unskilled jobs?

No, you were all the same.

Was there training with new garments?

Yes, but by then you were used to the machines and it was a lot easier then than the first lot.

You learn't as you were doing, and it was more the machines than the process?

Yes the machines. That's all there was apart from the cutting. He used to do a pile and he had this special thing that cut through, so he did a load of them in one go.

We did hand work. We put the buttons on, hemmed the coats.

Were there married women working there?

Yes, there were about three whose children were grown up, they could get themselves to school.

Were there any working mothers on the staff? If so, how did they manage? How were these viewed by the other workers?

Only the three with children. Once you had babies in those days you gave up work and brought it up, because there was no (apart from your parents) one to look after them for you. They didn't have the facilities they have now.

Were the women with children on different hours?

No, the same, there was no reduction of hours for anything.

Were you encouraged to go to night school?

No, nothing.

[17' 30''] **4. Wages**

Can you remember how much you were paid?

Two pounds a week when I first went there. Then it went up to two pounds fifty after I'd been there a while, I can't remember how many months or years.

How were you paid?

By cash in little brown envelopes; she'd written on it what all it was, the amount.

Would that be on a Friday?

Yes, on a Friday. Yes, she'd bring them round in the afternoon before we went home.

Did you know how much other workers were paid?

We were all paid the same. Even if you'd only started, you had the same as the others and everybody was the same right through. You didn't think anything of it. They wouldn't now, would they?

What did you spend your wage packet on?

Well, not a lot really. I gave half of it to my mum, so I had a pound and she had a pound. It was just general, if I wanted to go to the pictures in Denbigh or something. Never went on holidays, or anything like that.

Were there any perks working in the factory?

No, no perks.

Would you know if there was any pilfering?

No, I never saw anything like that; I never noticed anything like that.

There was one girl, she was getting married, she was doing her own bride's dress at home and she asked could she use a machine to stop it fraying – we had like an over-locker. The boss said, yes, of course you can. You wouldn't have brought it there and just sneaked it because she was out a lot, she wasn't there the whole day, but you never knew when she was coming back though.

Would that have been one of the perks of working there?

Might have been, yes.

Did you get any garments?

Oh, yes, I remember I had my going away coat after I got married, to go on my honeymoon. We'd done these coats and I liked the style and the colours and I picked the lilac one, and she said yes, ok then. A girl got married the week before me and she picked the green colour. We did them ourselves and we had help if we were stuck because it was a different style – you picked your own style and added on to them. We had them a lot cheaper and we could pay weekly for it.

[20' 40''] **5. Trade Unionism**

Were there any unions in the factory?

There was towards the end, there wasn't when I first went there. I can't remember what the union was called.

Were you a member?

Yes. I was pregnant then so I wasn't there long after that. I had to leave obviously.

Why did you join the union?

It was a thing you always did when I was young, everybody was in a union. I always thought at one time that you had to join them. I think you'd have a lot of things thrown at you if you didn't join. I never knew anybody who didn't, we all were in the union, everybody.

How did you pay your subs?

The girl who did our wages, she used to come round and she used to pay it up for us. We never had meetings or anything like that, we just paid.

Were there any disputes or problems?

No, nothing. We never thought about doing that I don't think. I don't think you'd get as much help as you would get now, actually.

Did you think as workers you were treated fairly?

Well, at the time I did, and I still think we were, because it was nice working there. She was very nice with us, she was like a mother with you. If you weren't well she would fuss you and go make you a cup of tea or something, that sort of thing. You wouldn't get it now would you?

Do you think the workers got on with the supervisors...?

Yes, two supervisors there, and we got on all right with them, and they treated you nice as well. There was no animosity between you at all. Nice time to be working that era.

It sounds quite harmonious...

Yes, it was very harmonious.

Did people look up... or not fear the supervisors or manager?

No. One was in school, same class as me, she was all right. We didn't have a manager, she ran it herself. She used to come in for a few hours, then she'd have to go somewhere, then she'd be back in again. She'd always be there before we left at night and make sure everything was ok.

[23' 30''] **6. Conditions:**

Did you have to wear a uniform to work?

No, no uniforms, whatever you wanted to wear.

Was the work dangerous in any way?

A few times I had a needle going through the nail and came out the other end of my finger. But she just pulled it out, dressed it and get on with it. But you thought nothing of it. It was something everybody at sometime or other did.

She didn't like you to have long hair, or tie it back if you did, in case it got stuck in the machine. It was one thing she did insist that we did. So pony tails were very fashionable in those days, we all had pony tails.

Were there any accidents like that?

No, that's the only thing I can ever recall, really.

Did you have any folk remedies for small injuries?

She just cleaned it up for you. She had plasters and bandages and cream there and she did it. It healed amazingly quick.

Were there any other rules and regulations, apart from the hair?

No, it was just the hair really, because you could with the machine going up and down your hair would be catching in it, and your hair all tangling round.

Was anyone in charge of making sure about things like that, about health and safety?

No, never saw anybody like that, you just did as you were told, and that was it.

Was the factory heated, well lit?

Yes, it was heated and there were loads of windows all the way down. We had the big room, it must have been the classroom, it was huge. There was plenty of light.

(In winter) The heating was done with coke or coal and in winter, a fire downstairs and the fellow who cut the material saw to that. Big huge pipes going along the floor more or less; nice if you could get your feet on them.

What were the facilities (toilets/ changing rooms and washing) like?

Yes, we did have a toilet there, only two and they had a wash basin there. We had a little kitchen downstairs which had a cooker there. So if you wanted to bring a pie or something and you wanted to heat it, you could heat it. We never really cooked anything on it as such, you just brought something you needed warming up, or a bit of soup, you could bring it with you.

So there was no canteen?

No canteen, brought stuff in from home.

Did they play music while you worked?

Yes, we had a radio. The radio was not far from where I was and I could stand up from my seat if somebody said can you put it a bit higher, somebody liked the song coming up, and you'd put it up. Then she'd come in and she'd say, that's too loud, she'd whisper and turn it down. As soon as she'd gone into the office, up again!

Did you have a favourite station?

Oh, yes, I think it was *Music While You Work* or something – they went into factories didn't they. There was one programme, but it was all the ...Nat King Cole and all that singing. As they are now, they have their favourites don't they, the youngsters.

Were you allowed to chat while working?

Yes, if you could if you could hear with the machines going. They were all joined on together, in front of you, you had this dip thing where your clothes as you did them fell into there, that was your bit.

Was it very noisy?

A bit, but I got used to it, didn't notice it after awhile.

So you could talk?

Yes, but you had to shout sometimes, unless you're talking to the one right next to you.

Were you allowed to smoke while you worked?

I can't remember any of them smokers. Oh, yes, there was one, she had to go outside, she never smoked inside. She's the only one, of all of us there. I never noticed anyone smoking, don't think anyone did.

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

No, nothing at all.

How did the women workers treat the man who worked there – did they tease him or harass him?

No, he was getting on actually, I think he must have been well in his fifties; he was married and had a daughter that was grown up who worked in a bank. So he was very pleasant, you could have a joke with him and have a laugh with him now and again.

If married – how did your husband view you working?

Well I didn't work until they were both in school. Because I couldn't get to Denbigh, I had a job here in the canteen, so I was off all the time with the children as well.

Before you had the children you were working until...?

Six months pregnancy you had to work.

While you worked did your husband help domestically?

No, they didn't seem to do that then. But he worked long hour in Pilkingtons, he was an electrician there and working a lot actually; overtime and that sort of thing.

[31' 30''] **7. Hours / Holidays**

How many days did you work per week?

Five days and sometimes a Saturday morning if we needed to get something out quickly. If she had two lots of things we had to do and hadn't finished them, we'd work a Saturday morning.

And were you paid overtime?

Yes, about fifty pence I think it was!

How many hour a day?

We used to start work at eight o'clock in the morning and never finished 'till six. It was a long day.

Did you work shifts at all?

No, we didn't work shifts.

Did you have to clock in?

Oh, yes, clock in and clock out – put the card in the machine.

Did you have any breaks during your working day?

Yes, we had a morning break. We only had enough time to go down to the little kitchen and you made your own cup of tea or a coffee. By the time you threw that down, you had to go back. She'd be at the top of the stairs saying, come on now girls, back to work. We didn't have a break in the afternoon.

And lunchtime?

An hour. Because it wasn't far out from the centre of town, we used to go out. Sometimes in the winter we stayed in if the weather was bad, but otherwise we'd just go wandering around the town; especially on Wednesday when they had a market there.

No canteen... did you have to pay for your tea or coffee?

No, she provided the sugar and the tea and the coffee. She did provide a cooker if we wanted to cook something.

Did you have an annual holiday allowance with pay?

Yes, I think it was a week. ..It shut down.

You all took your holiday at the same time?

Yes, there was no taking it separate, I'm afraid.

What about Bank holidays?

Yes, we had Christmas day and Boxing day off, otherwise we worked Christmas eve and straight back on the twenty seventh.

And Bank holidays in the summer...?

We had Easter, like they do now.

How many days a year did you have for holidays?

I think it was a week when I first went there, 5 days.

And did you go on holiday?

No.

Were you allowed days off for personal reasons funeral or anything like that?

No. I don't think so; I can't remember asking for one.

8. Travel to work

How did you get to work?

[35'] I walked. I lived by the Golf Club in Denbigh, I walked from there and back up again every night. It's a good way, up through Henllan Street and up past Copy Farm and Bryn Efydd. I sometimes had a lift off my brother on his bike - he sat me on the bar in front. He used to go on his bike, he worked in Ruthin, and he used to leave it at the bottom of Henllan Street - he had a friend living there and he used to keep it there. Occasionally I'd have a lift, but sometimes he didn't bother, depending on the mood he was in.

Was it far to travel?

It must have been two miles there and two miles back again.

What time did you leave in the morning?

I used to leave about seven. I used to run all the way down, hills all the way down, run most of the way.

Did people travel from far in?

No, most of them were from Denbigh. There was one from Bodfari, but she had a bus used to go there. There was no buses at that time of the morning where I lived.

[36' 30''] **9. Social Life**

Were any social activities organised by the workers?

No, not really. Oh, at Christmas-time we had a do in the bottom of town, where the Twm o'r Nant Theatre is now. We used to have like a village band used to come, she'd hire one of them, locals, and they'd play music for you to have a dance and she'd have a buffet there for us. She provided it all for Christmas.

Were there any trips or outings?

We went to Blackpool once to the Blackpool Tower. I can't remember what we went there for. I went with them, that was the only trip. We were all excited, never gone on a trip, never gone out of Denbigh really, let alone Blackpool...She organised that, got a coach for us, or charabanc as they called them then.

Is there any one event which you remember in particular from your time in the factory? Or did anyone come from the places you sewed for?

They did come, but they only went straight to the office, they didn't come in to see us. She took a few garments into the office to show them, in case they wanted something different. They never came into the actual factory where we were working anyway.

[39' 10''] **10.** *Did you enjoy working at the factory?*

I did enjoy it, very much, yes.

Job satisfaction?

Oh, yes, definitely. I made a lot of old friends which I knew in school, then I got friendly again with them. We used to go to the pictures ourselves in Denbigh, and go to these village dances. We used to walk to Llandyrnog to a dance, carrying our shoes – our high heels.

You decided to leave when you were pregnant?

Pregnant with my daughter, yes. Six months I was, pregnant.

Were you required to leave?

I think so. I would think you must have been. If you managed to do the six months you would get help afterwards until the baby was born, from the dole I suppose.

How did you feel about leaving?

I was quite sad, but excited at the same time at the thought of having a little girl.

You weren't given a farewell party?

No, nobody had farewell parties, no.

How long did you work in the factory?

I went there... it must have been 1950, I suppose, and I left there early sixty two...
A long time.

What did you do afterwards? You were saying you did other jobs afterwards...

Yes, I went to work in the school in St Asaph. I came to live in St Asaph after I got married. There was a job going, once the youngest was ready for school. My husband worked in Pilkingtons, and there was a cleaner who came to clean there, but she was a cook in the school as well in the day. He said to her, if you've got a job going there, it would be ideal for my wife; she'd be off on all the school holidays with the children and be home before they came from school. The next thing she saw him in work and said, there's a lady leaving, she's pregnant, would she like the job? He said yes, she wasn't ready yet, there's another week before he goes to school but I'm sure we can sort out something for that week. So I went, that's how I had it. It was word and mouth in those days.

Are you in contact with anybody you worked with in the factory?

I do see some of them. There were two of them from St Asaph who worked there, and I do see them now and again, but I've not been living in Denbigh since I left work. And I think most of them left Denbigh anyway, leaving, going somewhere else with their husbands.

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

I was happy there, I really was happy there and I was quite happy with what I had because I don't think you wanted so much as people seem to want now. You were quite happy with what you got. You didn't think, oh I'd like this, I'd like that, it never crossed your mind because you knew you couldn't have it, and that was it!

It was a very good experience, yes, very good.

Thank you very much for telling us about your factory life.

Duration : 45 minutes