

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

## Graesser's Salicylates, Sandycroft (1954 - 1965)

**Interviewee:** VN049 Mavis Coxe and Sheila Edwards

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

### *1. Background:*

Mrs Sheila Edwards, Garden City; Date of Birth: 26. 09. 1942.

Mrs Mavis Coxe, Connah's Quay, formerly Garden City; Date of Birth: 3.10. 1938.

*If you could tell us a little about your background: where you were born and where your parents came from.*

Mavis: I was born in Queensferry; and I Sheila, was born in Garden City. We lived all our childhood in Garden City. My mother was formerly from Manchester, moved around quite a lot – her father was in the forces; came to Garden City. My father was brought up in Sealand (just outside Garden City), went to school in Sealand. They married in 1937; father worked in the steel works. Once the children were born, mum never worked.

*Where did you go to school?*

In Garden City, the same as our parents; from there I (Mavis) passed the 11plus and went to Hawarden Grammar.

I (Sheila) went to Deeside Secondary Modern School in Shotton; there the lessons were the normal lessons, but I took Commercial – I did Shorthand, Typing – concentrated on those, English and Maths.

Mavis: I didn't stay on to go to further education, being from a big family, obviously parents can't afford when you're one of the eldest of seven children, they just couldn't afford for me

to go on to college. I stayed at Hawarden Grammar for four years. I didn't sit my exams, unfortunately, that was the sign of the times. I left when I was nearly sixteen.

Sheila: I left school when I was nearly sixteen – in the May of the year I was sixteen, after going to Deeside Secondary Modern for four years. I did take exams; I took my PSC 1 and PSC 2 in Commercial. I didn't take any School Leaving Certificates at that time because I left school in the May as a job became available. I left a couple of months early, the year I was sixteen.

*Why did you decide to leave then?*

Sheila: Same reason, money situation.

*How did you feel about that?*

Sheila: I was quite happy about leaving school.

Mavis: I was as well!

[4' 50'' ]

## **2. Work**

*So, your first job after leaving school?*

Mavis: I went straight into Graesser's. I was turned sixteen when I started there. I was looking for work for a couple of months, and then a friend of mine told me that there was an opening there. This was just a post-girl, which was starting at the bottom basically, and you work your way up. Quite enjoyed it because I used to have to go all through the factory, taking mail around different departments. I used to have to do the post and record all the letters that went out, put stamps on them and such like. Basically that was my job, and making tea and coffee for the bosses. I did that for about eight, ten months, then this opening came up in the office of what they called the Service Department, and I went into that and I was there until 1965. I'd started in 1954 or early 1955. I then left there and went to another job. No, to have the children; I found out when I left that I was having a baby, so that was it for another six years before I started work again.

Sheila: My first job was at the same place, Graesser's, and I got the job through my sister. She worked in the office of the department that needed somebody in the Packing Department (the Service Department). I was there in May 1958. I was there for about eighteen months, when a position in the general office came up – the same job that my sister had had when she started as post-girl. I stuck that for a few months. I wanted to go back to the Service Department purely and simply because of the girl who was training me was, shall we say, not very nice.

Mavis: Plus you missed the company of the girls in the department.

Sheila: I did miss the company of the girls in the Service Department because I was isolated in a little office with this one person. I'm normally a person who can get on with anybody, but this one person was below par put it like that.

*Did you want to work there?*

Sheila: I did want to, because I wanted to progress through the office the same as Mavis had. But I soon realised that I enjoyed the company of the people, the girls and the boys in the Service Department. I asked the boss of the Service Department could I go back there, and he agreed to let me go back there; which I did. I stayed there until I left in 1964, to go to another job.

*Was it somewhere you wanted to work?*

Mavis: Well, it was a job, I didn't have any option, but I did enjoy my job, until latter years. I was given a lot of responsibility and unfortunately, the person I worked for took me too much for granted; unfortunately it ended on a sour note. But I did enjoy my work and I enjoyed the company because I used to have to go round several departments. I knew a lot of people and you could pass the time of day as you were going round, which I enjoyed.

*When you started (Sheila) your sister was working there.*

Sheila: She was already working there. It was her that got me into the company in the first place.

*Did you need any qualifications to get the job?*

No.

*Did you have any tests or interview?*

Mavis: I had interviews, quite a lot actually. But I think the fact that I was grammar school helped me.

Sheila: I didn't get an interview... Well, yes, I had an initial interview with the boss who Mavis worked for. I didn't have to do any tests because he had my PSC 1 and 2 results, so he knew I was proficient in Shorthand Typing, English and Maths. You didn't really need a lot for the job that I was doing.

Mavis: It wasn't like these days where you had to have CVs and things like that; you didn't need them in those days. Most of it was word of mouth.

Sheila: Plus the fact that there were a lot of people there that I knew, that were from the same village as us.

*It was a place that a lot of local people worked in?*

Yes, there was a lot. They came from as far as Flint, Buckley, Holywell, Hawarden; they came from within say, a ten mile radius.

*What was your exact work in the factory?*

Mavis: I was all office work.

Sheila: Mine was actually both: I did some office work. At the end I was spending two days on the factory floor and three days in the office going round the different departments checking what stock was there. It was part of Mavis's job, I went counting the packing materials and putting them into a ledger for Mavis to do a month's end review to know the ordering. But the rest of the time I was working in the actual packing department which I really enjoyed. There was a very good camaraderie amongst everybody, and it was really good. Apart from that, whilst I was there, I was seconded into another department, upstairs, making the actual Aspirins that the company produced.

Mavis: On the machine that actually made the tablet. They didn't make the material, but they actually made the tablet...

Sheila: From the powder – the powder was poured in and they came out as a tablet, but in bulk, not in small quantities, it was all in bulk.

*What exactly did the factory make – the end products?*

Mavis: They were all fine chemicals: aspirin; they were one of the first companies in the country to make paracetamol. They actually manufactured the fine chemicals for medicinal... they went to all these big manufacturers of medicines. We used to despatch to places like that – the ingredients. They made aspirin, they made salicylic acid.

Sheila: Aspro.

Mavis: No, Aspro was the trade name. I can't remember the end products, because I used to order all the raw materials that went into the products. The main manufacture was aspirin, which is acetyl salicylic acid – the official name for aspirin. That was the biggest sale was aspirin.

*All chemical processes?*

Mavis: All the different departments it had to go through before it went to the packing department. There were actually twelve, no fifteen processes.

Sheila: Twelve was where the phenol ... where the big accident was, and number one had a big accident.

Mavis: One was a massive one.

Sheila: There was one death in that one, wasn't there?

*The chemicals were quite volatile?*

Both: Oh, yes, it was a very dangerous place.

*How did you feel about working there?*

Sheila: Never thought about it.

Mavis: I enjoyed it.

Sheila: I enjoyed the work.

*How did other local people see working in a factory? Did you have a status working there or...?*

Sheila: No, it was just a job.

Mavis: No, it was a factory; it was just a job really. It wasn't a career really, it was a job.

[17']

### **3. The job ...**

*Can you remember your first day at work?*

Mavis: Yes, I was rather a shy person; I think I was overwhelmed. Very nervous, I was very very nervous. Really didn't know how to react to the bosses, but you soon get over it. They did make me feel welcome.

Sheila: Nervous in as much as it was something new, but I was in the lucky position that my sister was already there, and there were friends that were already there. So that eased me in a lot. I was allocated to one person on the factory floor who I stayed with and worked along side her for a few days until I got the jist of it, and then I was put on the line. As I say on the line, it was a group of women all working together, doing different stages of the packing to the end product. I started at the very end actually, packing the finished product into cartons, and then you progress along the line until you know all of the different processes.

*What were your first impressions?*

Sheila: When I walked in, I thought, I looked around, I'd never been in a factory before, and it was rather huge. There wasn't a lot of machinery.

Mavis: There wasn't any machinery in the Service Department.

Sheila: There was a lot of packing materials. As you came through the door and you're faced with these huge drums, and you think, my gosh, what's this? But once you've seen it, that's it, it's done. There was no fear attached, it was just the unknown.

Mavis: I was fortunate in that the girl that I was taking over from was a friend of mine and she actually took me all round the works, to show me the route and all the offices that the post had to go and all that sort of thing, which was quite a lot to take in. But she stayed with me for about a week until I got into it, then I was fine. I found initially, when you first start, there was one particular department – which was the engineering department – it was all young men, I used to get embarrassed going in there, until I got used to them. They used to

try and embarrass you in all different ways, you know, but it took me a long time to get used to that. Other than that I just took it in my stride.

*Can you describe a working day?*

Sheila: I used to start before Mavis, we used to start at eight o'clock and the offices started at nine.

Mavis: I worked nine 'till five.

Sheila: I worked eight 'till five. I used to get to Queensferry and there would be a private bus, a Lloyd's bus that had come from Buckley through Queensferry to Garden City. So those who wanted to go on the bus that came from Flint and Holywell had to get to Queensferry and were also on the bus, but that bus was free. It would be waiting outside the factory for us at the end of the working day. I used to have to clock on before eight o'clock and clock out not before five o'clock. In that time we had lunch from half twelve 'till half one and we had a tea break half way between, twenty minutes for a tea brake morning and afternoon. We used to go over to the canteen, we'd pre-order what we wanted so that would be ready for us when we got there, so that you weren't wasting any of your time ordering and them doing it etc. But lunch, whether you bought it in the canteen or took your own sandwiches. On the factory floor, there was what we used to call the 'mess room', only a small room.

Mavis: if you took your own you'd eat in there or could take it to the canteen.

Sheila: Yes you could choose if you took your own sandwiches, but the meals were very cheap and it was all home cooked on the premises; lovely meals couldn't fault the meals.

*When you got in, in the morning, how did they allocate the work to you?*

Sheila: You knew where you were going; you would go back to where you were the night before, unless you were called for a different job. Nine times out of ten you went back to what you were doing the previous night.

Mavis: This packing that Sheila used to do was all in small packs and they were then packed into bigger boxes. It was mostly for export, but all that was dealt with from the general office. In our department we didn't deal with that, all we dealt with was making sure the right weight was in the packages, they had the right labels and all that sort of thing. We despatched from there – it was a despatch department as well as packing, but all the paperwork for the despatches was all done in the general office.

Sheila: British Road Services used to come, didn't they, and collect them? And quite often they used to give us a lift in the back of the van home, because we could get home quicker than the bus.

Mavis: We got to know the driver (he was actually engaged to one of the girls who worked upstairs). He used to be able to drop us just at the end of the road where we lived, it was better than getting the bus.

Sheila: They wouldn't be allowed to do that these days, I don't suppose.

Mavis: I didn't start 'till nine o'clock. I had to get my own way there. I cycled or I got the bus, more often than not I cycled – weather permitting. At lunchtime, the Service Department went for their meal before us (in the office) we went...

Sheila: About half way through, didn't you? After the queue'd gone down...

Mavis: No, we were never eating in there at the same time; not to my recollection anyway. It wasn't just our side of the works; there was another which was R-Greasser. We were Greasser Salicylates and there was another company called R-Greasser and we shared the canteen. All the staff went at one time and the workers on the shop floor went previously.

R-Greasser, they made Phenol, but they made heavier chemicals than Greassers who did the fine chemicals.

Sheila: They did the heavy duty chemicals.

*You said you changed jobs while you were at the factory? Why?*

Mavis: When I was on the post, I worked in the general office; from there I went to work in the office in the Service Department, which was where Sheila worked. Then I was there for the rest of my time there.

Sheila: I went to do the same thing as Mavis, as a post-girl, but I went back to the Service Department. I was happier there. But I had a combination of the two, I had a little bit of paper work to do and going round the factory, which, as Mavis said, we were all friends as such.

Mavis: You knew everybody, but I knew everybody by name because (while I was on the post) I used to have to write all the wage slips out for everybody in the works. I had to write the wage slip which then went to the Accounts Department to be made up, so I knew everybody in the works. I think there were about one hundred and fifty, one hundred and sixty – something like that. But I wasn't on the clock, Sheila was on the clock, but I wasn't – staff didn't have to. This was the thing in those days, they'd definitely, they call them the white collar workers don't they. These days everybody's equal or more so than they were then. But I must say, in some cases... I preferred it once I moved into the Service Department because...'

Sheila: There wasn't as much snobbery.

Mavis: The thing is that the people on the shop floor thought that all the ones who worked in the offices were snobs, but it wasn't really because I worked with both and they were no different. It was just the way it seemed.

*You enjoyed the work?*

Sheila: Oh, I loved it. I liked the comradeship, and we used to sing as we were working – we used to sing all the old songs from the war, all Vera Lynn songs.

Mavis: There was definitely a good atmosphere in that particular department.

Sheila: It was really good. I would say almost a hundred percent got on with everybody else. I don't think there was a lot of conflict in there.

Mavis: I was a little bit on the edge because I worked in the office; I felt I was.

Sheila: Did you?

Mavis: Yes, definitely.

Sheila: But some of them were your friends as well.

Mavis: Oh, it was just certain ones. You felt that you weren't accepted. I wasn't accepted like the ones who worked on the shop floor.

Sheila: Oh, I see what you're saying.

Mavis: Not until latter years.

*Anything you didn't enjoy?*

Mavis: I don't think so.

Sheila: Well, the money was not very good at all, and that was the only reason why I left. In 1964, a friend of mine who worked for a company called Hanson's Dairies (which was all dairy products and the delivery of milk) they had an opening in the office where she worked. They knew that I was good with figures and it was in the accounts department checking all the accounts. I had an interview there, and I was going there, and I was getting twice the amount of what I was getting in the factory. That was the only reason was the money.

*How many other women worked in the factory?*

Sheila: In our department, there were about fifteen girls.

Mavis: There were about fifteen girls and there was another small business upstairs...

Sheila: Aspro – Nicholas...

Mavis: No, it was Newpacks who were upstairs; Aspro Nicholas bought Greasser's out in latter years, not while you were there I don't think.

Sheila: It was Aspro-Nicholas whilst I was there.

Mavis: Well, I don't know. The company upstairs was Newpacks

Sheila: Yes, I remember that name now.

Mavis: They were actually a separate company within Greasser's. Still to do with packing of the products, but I think it was a bit more specialised what they were dealing with. We didn't

have anything to do with them and there were quite a lot of them up there, weren't there? They again didn't mix with the ones downstairs.

Sheila: Even though there was a girl from our village working up there.

*Were the women all in a particular place, in particular jobs?*

Mavis: A few women worked in the research lab, women in this one upstairs and on our shop floor.

Sheila: There was a woman in Number Five.

Mavis: That's right, but there weren't many women actually where there were dangerous chemicals; it was all men there.

Sheila: And of course there was the trades-men: the plumbers, the electricians – the Engineering Department.

Mavis: But there was only women working mostly in the offices, in the research lab and our department.

Sheila: One woman in the warehouse, and one in Number Five, working with Geoff. And that was it.

Mavis: The majority was male.

Sheila: There was about half a dozen men in our department. They were to move the heavy drums and the weighing of the stuff.

Mavis: That's right moving things around and transferring, bringing the products from the different departments for the packing.

*Did you say about a hundred and fifty people there?*

Mavis: That was on the clock – a hundred and fifty on the clock, and then there was the staff as well.

*There was quite a lot working there.*

Sheila: Yes, because there was the two labs (the research and the works lab); there was the printing department...

Mavis: Ah, that was nothing to do with Greasser's, it was just a printing works that was based in the same place.

Sheila: Wasn't it? Didn't they print the labels for us?

Mavis: Yes, but it was nothing to do with Greassers.

Sheila: I thought they were part of the same thing.

Mavis: No, they weren't.

*Did the numbers change over the time you were there?*

Mavis: No. When Aspro-Nicholas took over, there were a few people from them. They came from Stockport and a few people from there came, but only on the office side; there weren't many.

*Would you say that there skilled / semi-skilled and unskilled jobs in the place?*

Mavis: The majority of them in the plants weren't skilled, only the engineering department

Sheila: Just machine operators weren't they as such?

Mavis: Yes, but it wasn't something you had to have apprenticeships for or anything like that. It was only in the Engineering Department where they were classed as skilled. They had electricians, plumbers, there was a joiner as well, wasn't there? But there was only them that were skilled, the rest of it anybody could have come and been trained for it.

*How could you move from an unskilled to a skilled job – there was no way of doing that?*

Mavis: No

*You were offered training to help you with the job?*

Sheila: Only with the person that you were working alongside.

Mavis: Or when I moved from the post into this job that was my final job there, they always had two people working in the office and one of them was leaving so I went in her place and the other girl taught me the job. It was all admin really.

*Were there married women working there?*

Both: Yes.

*They did the same jobs as the unmarried women?*

Both: Yes.

*Were there any working mothers on the staff? If so, how did they manage?*

Sheila: I can't remember any mums there. Can't remember mums being there, because they mostly all left when they got pregnant. I don't recall any mums there. I'm trying to think of the older women that were in there, but no, they didn't have children.

Mavis: No, I don't recall any of them having children.

*Were you encouraged to go to night school to get further qualifications?*

Mavis: No.

Sheila: There was nothing really to go for. There was no promotion within, only for the men, going into one of the plants if somebody left.

Mavis: That was somebody going from one of the departments; they could be transferred into a plant...

Sheila: And they would get more money for that wouldn't they? But that was the only way to advance, to go from the Service Department into one of the plants.

[38' 30'']

#### **4. Wages**

*Can you remember how much you were paid?*

Sheila: My first week's wage was two pounds four and nine. I was fifteen years old, and that was my top line before tax and insurance. I can't remember what my take-home pay was. But of course, in those days you had to hand your wages over to your mum. I used to have ten bob pocket money, which is the equivalent to fifty pence now.

Mavis: I started on three pounds a week, sorry three pounds fifty – ten shillings in those days. I had ten shillings pocket money and I had to pay my bus fares out of that.

*Did you have a pay rise at all?*

Sheila: Yes, every birthday until you were twenty one and that was your final top line. Twenty one was your final top line, unless the company gave extra pay. But you had your birthday rise and if the company gave you a rise, as a general so much percentage of your wage, then we used to have the two rises a year. If there was a general rise and a birthday rise up until you were twenty one, but I don't think it affected your holidays. You just had two weeks paid holidays in those days.

*Was that the same for office workers?*

Mavis: I think it was the same.

Sheila: You got extra holidays didn't you?

Mavis: I can't remember. I think I did get extra holidays.

Sheila: I think it was something like a day a year wasn't it?

Mavis: That's right you got an extra day for each year.

Sheila: But the factory workers didn't get that.

Mavis: No, they didn't get that.

Sheila: They just had the two weeks.

*How were you paid? Brown envelope?*

Sheila: Yes, in a brown envelope, on a weekly basis; on a Thursday.

Mavis: Yes, Thursday was pay day usually.

Sheila: We had to work a week in hand.

Mavis: I don't think the shop floor did it, but the staff paid into a medical – so much a week out of your wages, so that if you were off sick you got extra money. You got your sick pay off the Government, but you also got something from the fund in the works as well.

Sheila: I remember something a bit like sixpence a week, something like that.

Mavis: It wasn't much, but I did get that extra.

Sheila: You got help with your dental, and with your glasses through it. I didn't wear glasses in those days.

Mavis: I don't recall that.

Sheila: That might have been at Hansen's.

Mavis: That might have been, but when you were off sick you just got your basic sick pay and so much extra from the medical fund.

*Do you know how much other workers were paid, was there a differential in pay?*

Mavis: The factory workers, the ones actually in the factory were paid more, but I can't remember. I didn't have anything to do with that, I only wrote the envelopes.

Sheila: I know that the Service Department was the lowest out of the whole factory, the lowest wages.

Mavis: Weren't the cleaners? Tommy was the cleaner wasn't he? But he worked in the Service Department anyway didn't he?

*What did you spend your wages on? You gave most to your mum?*

Sheila: They had all of it, I had ten shillings a week, but out of that ... my mum used to buy my clothes. I didn't have bus fares. If I was going on the works bus I'd have to get a bus from Garden City to Queensferry...

Mavis: That only used to be something like a penny, didn't it?

Sheila: Yes, a penny (it's two pounds thirty now from one bus stop to the next – for a mile). I used to get the bus from there to Queensferry and then I'd get the works' bus, which was free. Or somebody would come along in the car and see a couple of you standing there that they knew and they'd give you a lift in, depending which came first – the bus or somebody with a car.

Mavis: I went on my bike most of the time.

Sheila: My mum used to buy the clothes. She used to give you your dinner money every day, either take sandwiches or she'd give me one and six or two shillings for a meal.

*Were there any perks working in the factory?*

Mavis: No.

Sheila: No, no perks.

*Were you aware whether there was any pilfering?*

Sheila: I wouldn't have thought you could pilfer anything.

Mavis: Not that I know of. I'm sure there must have been to a certain extent. The only thing I would say, Aspirin tablets.

Sheila: That's the only thing.

Mavis: But if you did have them you'd have the rejected ones because they had to be measured and ...

Sheila: Measured for thickness and...

Mavis: Everything – they had to be measured, and if they weren't, if they came out too thin, they'd go in another part, but then officially they were supposed to go back to the factory to be ground down again then redone, but that was all. The usual pen and paper, perhaps. People didn't have anything to steal in those days.

Sheila: I never knew of any. I only ever remember one person getting fired in all the years I was there.

Mavis: Who was that do you remember?

Sheila: For drinking.

Mavis: She wasn't fired, I know who you mean, but she wasn't fired. She was ill wasn't she.

Sheila: Is that why she left? I don't remember anybody being fired then. She was caught drinking.

Mavis: Oh yes. It was dreadful, she used to come into work drunk. She was naughty.

*There was a sort of disciplinary procedure.*

Both: Oh, yes.

[47']

## **5. Trade Unionism**

*Were there any trade unions in the factory?*

Mavis: Yes, I think there was, but it was more for the factory, more so than...

Sheila: We didn't have any problem with the bosses, did we? We didn't have any.

Mavis: No, but unions aren't just for that are they? I don't recall, I'm sure there must have been, but I can't recall.

Sheila: No, I can't either, but I do remember after the accident the union coming round to find out what ...

Mavis: Yes, so there must have been one.

*Did you pay union subs?*

Sheila: I don't think so.

Mavis: They definitely didn't have a union for the staff.

Sheila: I can't remember in all honesty. I can't remember being in any union until I went to work at Bees.

*Were there any disputes or problems or strikes?*

Sheila: Never strikes! Never ever had a strike. They were pretty good on if you needed dental treatment, if you needed to go to the dentist or things like that. They were very good at giving you the time off.

Mavis: They were pretty fair on things like that.

Sheila: They were very fair. And if you were ill, they would supply the works' car to take you home.

*Did you feel the workers were treated fairly?*

Mavis: Oh, yes.

Sheila: We never had any problems, in all honesty, no.

Mavis: Maybe, I don't know whether they did in the factory. I can't recall ever having any problems.

*How did the workers get on with the supervisors, management or the owners?*

Sheila: They were friends.

Mavis: There never seemed to be any problems.

Sheila: They were friends. Gordon was our charge hand wasn't he? And he was like a dad to all of us.

Mavis: Yes, he was the charge hand wasn't he?

Sheila: And Sid Owen was all right – he had his moments (a moody man) – but you knew when not to speak to him. We didn't see him a lot.

Mavis: Some of the hierarchy could be a little bit up themselves, for want of a better word. But on the whole, it was fine.

Sheila: But even one of the Greassers, who was Ron Greasser, he was fine.

Mavis: He'd come round the factory and he would speak to you and that sort of thing, but he was one of the owners.

Sheila: But he worked in the general office and he was fine.

Mavis: Even GT would occasionally go round the works, tap you on the head, "How you doing, this morning?"

Sheila: A bit patronising, but you never thought anything of it then.

Mavis: No, that's right. No, the camaraderie was very good really.

Sheila: They were a good company to work for. I never had any problems anyway. Only money wise, they weren't very forthcoming, they were low wages, but it was a steady income.

*You didn't really fear supervisors or managers at all?*

Both: No!

*Did you look up to them?*

Mavis: No

Sheila: We respected them for what they were.

Mavis: But that's how things were in those days.

Sheila: It was the same with teachers, you respected teachers and policemen and doctors.

[51']

## **6. Conditions:**

*Did you have to wear a uniform for work?*

Both: No.

Sheila: Used to have to wear an overall, white, like a lab coat. And they were cleaned at the works – they had them cleaned every week. You had two a week I think; they had your names in them and they were cleaned every week.

*Was the work dangerous in any way?*

Mavis: No.

Sheila: Not in the Packing Department, no.

Mavis: Dangerous in the departments,

Sheila: In the plants.

*Because of the processes or the chemicals?*

Sheila: The chemicals, yes.

Mavis: They were working with things like Sulphuric acid and Acetone. Oh, no, that was only in the lab wasn't it, the Acetone? What's the one that smells vinegary?

Sheila: Acetic Acid.

Mavis: Acetic Acid, and Glycol - that was quite dangerous. It was dangerous on that score.

Sheila: But they were kept in sort of cages weren't they? Apart from the ones that they were using, they were out on the plant floor, but the bulk was kept in.

Mavis: They were very safety conscious.

*You do remember injuries associated with the work?*

Sheila: There were explosions.

Mavis: There was one big explosion in Department One.

Sheila: And one in twelve.

Mavis: The one in Department One, I can't remember his name...

Sheila: He was badly burnt, terrible burns, he never worked again.

*Was that something overheating?*

Mavis: No, I think it was an explosion.

Sheila: There was like a thing, a gauge, and if it went over a certain temperature it used to heat up, didn't it. But something exploded.

Mavis: It was a really bad accident.

Sheila: And the one in dept... was that the one where somebody was killed in that one or was that in twelve?

Mavis: Department One, I think.

Sheila: Where did Peter Ellis work? It was in the same department as he worked in. Pete was in hospital for a long long time; nearly a year.

Mavis: Department Twelve.

Sheila: Well, there was somebody killed in his department.

Mavis: It wasn't fatal in the other one, but he was very badly burnt.

Sheila: I'm trying to think of the name of the man that died. He was a very handsome man, grey hair...

*Was that another explosion?*

Sheila: Yes.

Mavis: That was Phenol.

*Did you have any injuries associated with your job?*

Sheila: There was a guillotine that we used to cut the paper with, but I don't think anybody ever had an accident with it.

Mavis: The only thing was, you could get skin problems from some of the products, but only if you were allergic. Did you have gloves? I can't remember.

Sheila: Yes, you had to wear gloves if you were handling the ... if you were actually packing the cartons with the drug. It was just if you were in the packing, you had to weigh them and put them into the smaller, the little tiny bottles, and those bottles were then packed into a smaller carton, and then those smaller cartons were packed into a bigger carton and then stacked in the end.

Mavis: Ready for despatch.

Sheila: You were given an order to do and

Mavis: But where danger was concerned there was nothing dangerous, no.

*There would have been some rules and regulations that you had to adhere to?*

Sheila: Yes, you always had to wear gloves if you were in the Filling Department. I had to wear gloves up in Number Six.

Mavis: Didn't you have to have nets on your hair too?

Sheila: Nets on your hair, yes, and a mask. They were the cotton masks.

*Were you made aware of health and safety issues?*

Mavis: Not like they are today; it was just common sense really.

Sheila: And if you had an accident, it had to go in the accident book.

Mavis: Anything, it had to go in the accident book.

Sheila: Even if you had a paper cut – we used to have this cellophane, you had a carton and it was encased in cellophane with seals on the top and the bottom, we used to have to cut those to size. Quite often that paper...

Mavis: You could get quite a bad paper cut. I don't recall having to put that in the book.

Sheila: Well, if you needed a plaster you it had to put it in the safety book.

Mavis: Of course, why you had the plaster, what the plaster was for, that's right, in a little book.

Sheila: That was all supplied. The cleansing stuff and ...

Mavis: Ah, yes, there were First Aid boxes in all departments. That was something else I used to have to check on. I'd forgotten about that.

*Did you attend any health and safety courses?*

Sheila: No. They didn't have them in those days.

Mavis: They had First Aiders, I think.

*How was the factory heated / lit (any natural light?) Were these issues?*

Sheila: Oh, there was a big furnace! That was the only bit of machinery that was in our department.

Mavis: The big blower, that's right.

Sheila: It came through pipes running along the wall where we used to do the packing – they were along the wall underneath. So if you were sat underneath you could feel the heat from the pipes. They weren't radiators as such.

*And was it well lit?*

Both: Yes, good lighting.

Sheila: There were windows all the way along the packing side, weren't there? And they had like these Perspex roof in certain areas, where all the packs were stacked.

*The facilities, did you have toilets/ changing rooms and washing?*

Mavis: Yes, that was in the mess room. There were two toilets, washbasin...

Shirley: There were two toilets and somewhere for you to hang your coats, washbasins. We all used to sit round this boiler type fire thing, it was an old fashioned like an enclosed boiler type thing with a pipe that went up through the roof and it was all warm and we used to sit round there having a drink. There was facilities for making tea and coffee in the mess room, so you didn't have to go over to the canteen if you didn't want to. If you brought your own lunch you could make your own tea and coffee. But we used to walk across to the canteen in

all weathers. You were given five minutes to walk there and five minutes to walk back, and ten minutes to have a drink.

[60' 30'']

Mavis: I didn't use that. In the office you didn't get that break, but we could have a drink at the desk.

*The facilities were similar for the men, they had changing room?*

Mavis: Yes.

Sheila: Where was the men's? I can't remember. For the fellows that worked in our department.

Mavis: I don't recall that now. They must have had, they couldn't have had one just for the women and none for the men... The men had the lockers.

Sheila: Yes, but where did they go to the toilet? Unless they went into the engineers' room.

Mavis: I don't know.

Sheila: There was only about half a dozen men who worked in there.

*In the general factory were there changing areas for men?*

Mavis: No, I don't think so.

*Did they play music when you were working?*

Sheila: No, we just used to have a sing song amongst ourselves. We had no radios or anything like that. There was a tannoy system, but that was just for if somebody was wanted they used to announce it.

Mavis: We didn't have anything like that.

*Was it very noisy in the factory?*

Mavis: In the factories it was.

Sheila: Well, in the plants it was.

Mavis: Centrifuges, that's what it was that blew up in Department One.

Sheila: The plants were very noisy, but not in the Service Department, it wasn't noisy. Only for the noise that you made with the trucks, because they were just two wheeled trucks that you took the drums round to what you needed the drugs. Then we used to have to go and weigh them on a big scale.

*Were you allowed to chat while working?*

Both: Oh, yes.

Sheila: If the work wasn't going on, you were told, 'That's enough now girls, get on with it.' But that was all.

*You wouldn't be allowed to smoke while working?*

Sheila: No, we used to go in the mess room.

*Was that the same with the office? Did people smoke?*

Mavis: I think they did because I remember seeing ash-trays. Yes, I think they did.

*Do you think you've suffered any long term effects on your health from working in the factory?*

Both: No.

*You said you were teased by the men, did the women tease the men?*

Mavis: Oh, I don't know. It was only because I was going into the department where it was just men, but the others wouldn't have done that. I suppose there would have been a lot of that.

Sheila: Yes, of course there was; banter.

Mavis: Bound to have been.

Sheila: There were quite a few girls going out with some of the fellows; quite a few got married.

Mavis: Yes. When I went into the workshop, I couldn't wait... I used to sort of watch who was there, certain ones I particularly liked, I wasn't so bad then, but other times I'd run in bang his stuff on the desk and run straight out again.

*Were you married when you were working?*

Sheila: I wasn't.

Mavis: yes.

*Was your husband supportive of you working?*

Mavis: He didn't like me working, but I was already working there. He didn't like me working, he was a jealous man, but he didn't put any objections in the way. We needed the money anyway.

*Did he help you with housework because you were working?*

Mavis: Oh, yes

Sheila: If she'd have had a choice of any man on this earth she couldn't have got a better one! His only fault was that he was jealous.

*You said your money helped...*

Mavis: When we bought our first house, in those days, when we got our mortgage -the one we got the wife's money was taken into consideration. Most places where you got your mortgages from it didn't. We couldn't have lived on just his money. He worked on the staff in the steel works; they were very low paid compared to the workers.

[1 hour 6minutes]

### **7. Hours / Holidays**

*How many days did you work a week?*

Sheila: Well, nine till five and sometimes we worked on a Saturday.

Mavis: I did Monday to Friday and every other Saturday.

Sheila: It was a forty two hour week, wasn't it?

Mavis: I don't know. I know I didn't have to work every Saturday, it was every other I worked.

Sheila: We had was a forty two hour week, but we worked 'till twelve on a Saturday, didn't we.

Mavis: Yes, you worked every Saturday morning.

Sheila: Only until twelve, though.

*You didn't work shifts?*

Both: No.

*You had to clock in?*

Sheila: Yes.

Mavis: I didn't.

*Any overtime work / pay?*

Sheila: If we did overtime at night, we got paid time and a half for it. If there was rush orders where we had to work 'till five on a Saturday or even Sunday, we got double time for.

*You had breaks during your working day?*

Both: Yes.

*And there was a canteen there as well?*

Both: Yes.

*You had an annual holiday allowance with pay?*

Both: yes.

*What about Bank holidays?*

Both: All Bank Holidays.

*How many days a year did you have for holidays?*

Mavis: I think I may have had two weeks plus a few days.

Sheila: We just had a two week holiday that was paid. You could have extra time, but you weren't paid for it.

*Did everybody take it off at the same time?*

Sheila: No, I always used to have Wimbledon fortnight.

Mavis: We did have shut downs.

Sheila: we must have had four weeks then, because I used to have Wimbledon fortnight off.

Mavis: Perhaps it was just the plant, for maintenance; definitely had shut-downs in the plant.

Sheila: We had nothing to produce, did we?

Mavis: That's right; the last week in July and first week in August was the shut-down week.

Sheila: We still worked.

Mavis: I think you did, and I did too.

*Where did you go on holiday?*

Sheila: We didn't.

Mavis: We couldn't afford holidays.

Sheila: On ten bob a week!

Mavis: And a family of seven kids!

*You said that you were allowed days off for personal reasons?*

Sheila: Yes, for dental or hospital.

*Would you have been paid for that?*

Sheila: No. You were given so many hours off. If it was a dentist...

Mavis: Staff did, I think we were allowed, staff would have concessions like that.

Sheila: We didn't. That might have been what you paid extra into.

Mavis: I don't know, but it was only coppers.

Sheila: If we had two hours off to go to the dentist, or if you had a hospital appointment, we had to clock out and clock in again.

Mavis: That's right, they had the clock cards, so they were paid for hours they actually worked. I used to have to do both, didn't I.

[1hour 9' 30'']

### **8. Travel to work**

*You travelled to work – you cycled and you travelled on the Work's bus; was it very far to go?*

Sheila: About three miles.

*You said other workers were within a ten mile radius?*

Mavis: I would think that would be the maximum; the majority were closer than that.

Sheila: Quite often, if it was nice, we used to walk home along the river - that cut a lot of the road out. I would say it was about three miles by road. But if there was a bunch of us going home we'd walk along the river. That was how we got our air. And at lunchtimes we used to go down to the river and eat our lunch.

*When did you leave of a morning?*

Sheila: I used to leave the house at twenty minutes to eight.

Mavis: I used to get a ten past eight bus to Queensferry, and then I'd have to get an other one from there, to be in work for nine o'clock.

Sheila: There was a bus at twenty to eight to Queensferry, and then the Lloyd's bus came at ten to eight.

Mavis: And when I was married, I lived in Sandycroft, so I used to walk.

[1hour 10' 50'']

### **9. Social Life**

*Were any social activities organised by the workers?*

Mavis: Yes, they used to do (at Christmas time) a works dinner and a staff dance as well. I was privileged; I was able to have two - to go to either. The staff dos you were allowed to take your partner, but the works do you weren't. It was all paid for.

Sheila: Always had fantastic parties. Everything was paid for.

Mavis: You'd have good dinner-dance.

Sheila: In Chester usually, wasn't it?

Mavis: We went Quaintways; staff we had it at the Talardy in St Asaph once; the Queen's Hotel in Chester.

Sheila: Where was that one in Chester where we used to have to go upstairs to, the one where we've got those photographs at home...but there were two or three places in Chester we used to go to. They were all dinner dances, set dinners, three course or even four courses.

Mavis: We had some good parties, but nothing else during the year.

*No trips or outings?*

Mavis: Oh, yes, we did used to have trips.

Sheila: They were organised...

Mavis: And you paid for them

Sheila: Within the departments. The company would give you so much towards it.

*Did they have a work's band or choir?*

Mavis: No. Football team. Oh, hang on, it was R-G's not ours; the other Greasser's had the football team, but some of our lads would play for them.

*Did you participate in these?*

Sheila: Yes, and sometimes in the Service Department we'd organise it ourselves.

Mavis: Also on the staff they used to do theatre trips. That was another perk for the staff.

Sheila: Oh, I thought the company just paid for the coaches.

Mavis: It might have been. We might have had to pay for our own tickets...

Sheila: But the company paid for or supplied the coaches

*Did the factory have a social club?*

Mavis: No, I don't think so.

*It was the staff who attended these activities?*

Sheila: Who organised.

*Were family members allowed to attend these things?*

Mavis: Not usually.

Sheila: I can't remember. I don't think so. I think it was just for the workers.

*Is there any one event which you remember in particular from your time at the factory? Anybody famous visit? Or any particular event that sticks in your mind?*

Mavis: No, not that I can think of.

Sheila: No, I can't remember anybody coming. Apart from GT, he was the only one.

Mavis: He was the Managing Director.

Sheila: We didn't see him very often; but that was a big event when he came round.

Mavis: He had his office in the general offices. He used to come in most days, but he didn't go round. He'd go to the offices to see the managers of each department, but he'd just walk through and tap you and say, Good morning.

[1hour 15']

**10.**

*Did you enjoy working in the factory?*

Sheila: Yes, very much.

Mavis: Yes.

*Why did you enjoy it?*

Sheila: The friendship, and it was a very relaxed atmosphere; there was no pressure as such. If they came in and said, we need this order out pronto, then you would knuckle down and make sure that order was done for a certain time. I think BRS used to come about four o'clock didn't they? If there were a lot of big orders, then you'd have to get them ready for that four o'clock deadline.

Mavis: But there wasn't anybody standing over you, that sort of thing, none of that.

*When did you decide to leave?*

Sheila: In 1964, my friend who was working somewhere else told me that there was an opening in the accounts department there. Purely and simply because of the money, I went there to work. It was double the wages that I was getting.

Mavis: I left in 1965; I was there eleven years. I left after a dispute with my boss. I was offered a job in the general office, but would still have had to have dealt with him. So I

turned it down, and left with the intention of going somewhere else, but found out that I was pregnant. So I cut off my nose to spite my face.

*So you worked there for eleven years, and you worked there for six years?*

*How did you feel about leaving?*

Mavis: To be honest with you, I think in the end I was glad to go because the atmosphere with my boss wasn't good. He pleaded with me to stay on and he did actually say to me, I know you've got a dispute with me, you don't want to work with me, but Mr Benyon has asked if you'd like to go and work over there. But I would have still had to deal with him, so it wouldn't have been right. I found out he'd been talking behind my back and saying things that weren't true. I couldn't face that.

Sheila: You see, you couldn't take that to a disciplinary that type of thing.

Mavis: Because it would be one person's word against another.

Sheila: And I know who they'd believe.

*And how did you feel about leaving?*

Sheila: Sad to leave, but I was going into a different atmosphere again – totally new job, new challenge. And I can't say I didn't enjoy it because I did miss some of the girls, I missed the big, friendly atmosphere, because I was in a small office with just the two of us, but the offices were interconnected. But again, it was a lovely atmosphere to work in.

Mavis: Most of the time. There was a certain amount of bitchiness as well, which you always get with women wherever you work.

Sheila: Yes, but it wasn't that bad.

Mavis: But it wasn't bad.

Sheila: I've worked in much worse places, much worse. Whether I'm seeing it through rose coloured spectacles I don't know, but I can't remember personally having any disputes.

Mavis: No I wouldn't say they were disputes, but people used to talk behind backs.

*What kind of work did you do afterwards?*

Mavis: When I left there? Like I said, I had six years having the children, then I went to work in a small company where I did all the admin. Just a very small company - there was just the boss and myself for a long time. He had a workshop, three men worked in there and his wife did a certain amount of work from home. And I worked there for twenty nine years...I always did admin work.

Sheila: From there I went to Hansen's Deliveries. I did all the accounts for the delivery drivers, the delivery men who went round the houses, some who went to the old people's home or hospital or whatever, and I did the monthly accounts for those. The rounds men, I

did their weekly accounts – they brought their figures to me at the end of the day and I would log them, and at the end of the week they had to get the money and I would check it up – the money with what they collected with the money that was in their account. There were fifteen different rounds men that I had to deal with.

From there I went abroad – I went to America for two years. When I came back, I was married and had my son. Then I worked in Queensferry in the chip shop, just at lunch times while my mum had the little one. He was nearly three when I started there, because our next door neighbour also worked there. I used to do a couple of hours two or three days a week. Then when he started regular school, I went as a cleaner at Bees Nurseries part time, and I did that for three years; then they took me on full time. I was there until 1988. Again I left...ah, I did have a dispute with my boss, I did. Yes, I was treated very unfairly over something and the money wasn't very good. Deeside Industrial Estate had been built then and there was a lot of jobs going over there and it was all very highly paid. I went from earning fifty pound a week to a hundred and twelve pound a week, but it was shift work. I worked there until...that particular one closed – they moved the business to Scotland. It was all a government thing: bring your business to Scotland and you get so much. Anyway, it folded in the end because they didn't have the expertise, because the conditions that they moved they hired Scottish people. Nobody would go and teach the Scottish people the jobs, because that was all machinery work. I worked there until 1995 when that closed and by this time I'm fifty three years old. I never thought I'd get another job, but this new company called Almedica, which was a pharmaceutical company, they did package drugs for clinical trials. This job I absolutely loved and I left when I was too old to work. Well, that's not strictly true, I could have stayed on, but I chose to go. I was looking after the grandchildren by this time. I went down to part time so that I could have my grandchildren and save them some money.

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

Sheila: I still see them a lot. In fact I was only out with them for a meal last week.

Mavis: Not from Greassers, it's school friends you go out with.

Sheila: School friends and girls from work. The last job I worked in I still see them. If there's a birthday, they always phone me and say, so and so's birthday, we're all meeting at such and such a place. So we go for a meal. They keep in contact with me, but we don't see any of the ones from Greassers anymore.

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

Mavis: Well, I never felt it was a chore to go to work, put it that way.

Sheila: No, me too.

Mavis: We got to know a lot of people. There's only one person that I've kept in touch with from my time there and she lives just down the road. I'm still in touch with her, she was very good to me when I first started.

Sheila: She was a lovely girl, lovely, lovely.

Mavis: I'd see people occasionally, but with her I've kept the friendship.

*And how do you feel about your time there?*

Sheila: At Greassers? I enjoyed it. Had the money been better I would probably never have moved.

Mavis: But there's been an awful lot of changes in that company since.

Sheila: I don't think it's there any longer. That's where the go-karting is now.

Mavis: They've changed names so many times, because where I went to work after leaving there, they were one of my customers. And the number of times they've changed – gone into liquidation and changed their name probably five or six times.

Sheila: They did find when they pulled it down that a lot of the ground was polluted.

Mavis: There's been something in the paper about it just recently. I'm not sure it was there, I'm assuming it was there, but there was another chemical place, wasn't there, in Sandycroft? It might have been from there, but I think it was on the Graesser land.

*You have more good memories than bad?*

Mavis: More good memories

Sheila: More than bad, yes.

Mavis: Got no bad memories.

Sheila: But I don't think I would ever have left there had the money been better.

Mavis: In fact, later years, when Aspro-Nicholas took over, they brought a new plant to there, they built a big new building, and our mum came to work there.

Sheila: I wasn't there when she was there.

Mavis: No, I wasn't there either.

Sheila: She made Radox and things like that.

Mavis: They used to have a lot of that sort of thing, but they didn't make it, they packed Belladonna. They used to sell toiletries, talcum powders and shower gels and things like that. But mum worked there for a couple of years.

Sheila: But it was only after the children had grown up.

Mavis: That was a long time after I'd left.

*It was an important place for your family.*

Mavis: It was, just for the three of us anyway.

Sheila: None of the others worked there. The boys went into the steel works, Jane went into hairdressing, and then she went to the garage. (She worked at Tilly's sewing) They used to sew blouses for St Michael's, Marks and Spencer. That was in the top end of Sealand, where the Greyhound park is – Bumper's Lane.

*I've asked all my questions, is there anything I haven't asked?*

No, it's been nice to chat over old times.

*Thank you very much, you've been really helpful.*

Duration : 1 hour 30 minutes]