

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI

British Nylon Spinners

Interviewee: VSE009 Sheila Hughes
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Wales / Archif Menywod Cymru

So, Sheila could you tell me your names and date of birth please.

Yes, my name is Sheila Hughes and I was born on 2nd July 1937.

Could you tell us a little bit about your background, your mother, your father and siblings, anything like that?

No, I'm an only child. Couldn't afford any more, there was only me. My dad was a master baker and a musician, and has his dance band for many years and was still playing an instrument at the age of 92. Entertaining the old folk as he used to say. Mum was always at home until just before I got married and then she went to work in the shop. We had our own business, we were bakers and confectioners, and she went back to work in the shop, to help out in the shop.

So tell me about school. Where did you go to school?

I went to the British School in Abertillery and then from there I was very fortunate and I got a scholarship to go to the grammar school and was at the bottom of Oak Street where I lived, and the other one was at the top of Oak Street, so five minutes and I was in either way, to either school, so it was good. I didn't have to go far.

So you lived in Abertillery?

In Abertillery, yes. Until I got married and I was married when I was 20.

01:39

So how old were you when you left school? And what did you do?

I was 16 in the July and I started work in ICI, I think it was in the end of August, beginning of September, so I was 16.

Why did you decide to leave then?

Well I was offered a chance of a job at the nylon as it was, and there were about four or five thousand people working at the nylon then, so it was a good opportunity and they offered to take me in and train me as a shorthand typist, because at that time they had their own typing school, I think there were about eight of us, and we were to do, I'm trying to think how long it was, I don't know if it was a two or a three month course, which was very intensive to learn shorthand typing, office management, and things like that. Unfortunately I was a shorthand typist who couldn't read my shorthand back so I was asked if I would like to move to another department. We had to pass an entrance exam which was quite stiff and they couldn't understand how I'd done so well in the entrance exam and then couldn't do the shorthand. And I said, well it was like a foreign language and I'd failed French with honours at my O levels, so it was I could quite understand why I couldn't read the shorthand back.

So you did O levels?

Oh yes, I did O levels when I was at the grammar school, yes.

So how did you feel about leaving school when you did?

Oh I didn't mind. Not at all. My family were very upset because most of those were teachers, and they couldn't understand why I didn't want to go to college, but I had a boyfriend at the time and I didn't want to leave my boyfriend behind, I think that was the main thing. Although he didn't live locally, he lived over the valley, so I didn't see him that often anyway. But yes, so I left school when I was 16, much to my family's disgust.

So you didn't last very long as a shorthand typist then, so, tell me about the factory, what was the factory called, and what did you do?

It was called British Nylon Spinners, and it was owned by Courtaulds and I think ICI were connected with it as well. And it was the new fabric which was nylon in those days, because it didn't open until 1947 I think it was, and I started there in 1953, so it was really, I mean the site, if you see it now, is completely covered. When I started there, half of it was an empty site, they hadn't built half of the buildings. When I started there, there was no admin, there was no textile development department, there was no research office block, it was all sort of put into a pilot plant, then there was a big gap and then there was the main plant. And I ended up working in the main plant. I went from the typing pool, and I went into the physical test lab, where we used to test the different strengths and things of the nylon, as it came off the machines to make sure that the machines were working properly. It was very interesting.

05:28

So did you have to pass another test or interview to do that?

No, no I was just asked if I'd like to go, and I said, well, I'll go and give it a try and I was marched down the corridor and deposited in a terrific noise, because the lab that we were in when I started first of all, was at the end of what they called draw twist area, where all the machines were, and in fact, you couldn't hear each other speak, and it was very useful because I learnt to lip read, so yes, you could talk with girls at the other end of our lab which was, it must have been about 100 foot long and about 40 foot wide I expect, and yes, we used to talk to each by lip reading more than any other way of doing, because it was just so noisy. And I mean, in those days you didn't have ear protectors and all the rest of it, you just got on with it.

What was the name again that you called it?

Physical test lab.

No the, you said, the name of the....?

Oh draw twist, draw twist. When the nylon came, nylon came in as a polymer which was like little bits of gravel, and then it was heated to a super heat and it was forced down through what they used to call a spinnerette, and which was a bit like a showerhead and it would come out in long strands, and then it was taken down to the spinning area below, if I remember correctly, and it was put onto big, what they used to call cakes or cheeses, and it was wound onto drums, and then the drums were taken into draw twist area, and they were put onto another machine, and when they came off that machine they looked like milk bottles, but as it was, it was drawn out into a very narrow, a much narrower thread, and there was so much twist put in it to hold the filaments together, and that was why it was called draw twist. And then it went onto different processes after that. So it was, it was quite a long, involved process and one of the jobs that the girls in the PTL had, that was a tester lab, was to go around different areas with a machine that we used to christen Albert, which was a machine which took the humidity and temperature and all the rest of it, so we had to go all round the areas to see what was going on to make sure that the temperature and everything was correct, and I remember going up onto extrusion floor one day, and it was about 94 up there, and I was given orange juice and salt tablets because I was up there for quite a while, and that was the thing that they used to do in those days, to keep you know, to keep your fluids going, so it was salt tablets and orange juice, which was quite good.

Can you just describe to me then the first day you walked into the, and you said it was very noisy?

Oh it was very noisy, yes. Extremely noisy.

08:37

Just describe to me, you know, the physical space and also maybe the smell of the, the ambience of the place?

Well, you walked in, it was sort of on the of draw twist, and it was railed off by a sort of a metal fence, with wide entrance and exits because they used to bring the bobbins, which were the milk bottles, around on what they used to call buggies, and you'd have about 144 bobbins on a buggy, 72 on each side, and these used to wheeled in and then they were processed through, and they had different things done to them. The lady that was in charge, who was a lady called Rita Crosby, she seemed very nice and she turned out to be lovely, and there were two ladies there then who were sort of supervisors, one was Mary Simmonds and I can't remember the other one's name. And there were girls there who had been there several years and were quite a bit older than me I suppose. But I was the new girl and they treated me very well, and it was, as I said, it was a bit of a shock because of all the noise, I wasn't used to that at all, but you got used to it in the end. I went home with a headache that night if I remember correctly because it was a bit noisy.

Can you explain to me then, you started explaining some of the tests you used to do?

Yes, there was, let's see, we used to knit panels, we had circular hosiery knitting machines and, like they knit stockings on, we used to knit bobbins and we used to do so much of each bobbin, and then they used to go down to another department then which was down in the chemical lab, and they used to be dyed, different blues or black, that they could tell whether the dye was holding properly and things like that. We used to do, what was it called, there was a thing called a (?????) where we used to have to wind off so much yarn on a rack, and then it would be cut into lengths and then you would fasten it on the (????) and then that would tell you, you would have weights on the bottom, depending on what yarn it was, then that would tell you what the breaking strength of it was. We used to do other tests to find out how much twist was in the yarn, because it came from draw twist, and there was another one that we used to put, I think it was, I think they used to use one side of the buggy which was 72, and we'd put those on a rack and we would run those into a sort of a little cabin, and we'd watch the yarn coming through, and find out if there were any, what they called slubs, which was a fault in the yarn, and we'd have to count how many slubs that went through onto this, onto this machine, you know, that the yarn was coming through. So it was something different and you spent about a month on each process and then you were moved onto another one, that you didn't get bored, because if you'd been on there for weeks and weeks, you know months and months, it would have been mind-blowing. But because you were moved around from section to section it was quite good.

12:20

Did you always get kind of results before you?

Oh yeah, yeah. You had to get results and you had to mark them down and you had sheets to write everything down on you know, and if anything was way out of what it should be, then the machines were stopped and, you know, the draw twist machines were stopped and then they had to do some checking on that to find out what was causing all that. Why it wasn't into where it should be you know.

So it was like a kind of ...

It was a control centre really, you know. We controlled, we had to check that the machines were acting as they should be, so, it was very interesting.

And very cutting edge then, because it was a new industry was it?

Well, yes, I suppose it was in a way. I never even really thought of that. There was a plant that had been built before they built the main plant where I worked, which was called pilot plant, and I think there they did, you know, I don't think it was the first nylon factory because actually it came from America. It was, I'm trying to think what the name of it was. And I can't remember, but there we are, it will come to me in time. It came from a nylon, it came from American, and I think that the plant which was built there, which was pilot plant, was one of the first in this country, you know, so. But when you're 16 you don't really go much into the history of it. It was a job and I got three pounds a week, and I had, it was a pound for my bus fare, a pound for mum for my housekeeping, to look after me, I paid my way, and I had a pound pocket money, and, but things were different in those days. A pound pocket money went a long way, and they used to have private buses that took us to work, so the pound was my bus fare and my dinner money, and then my pound pocket money, well, when you're 16, what do you buy? Magazines and make up and things like that. I used to buy the Woman and the Woman's Own every week, and they were four pence halfpenny. And I mean, old money four pence halfpenny, not new money four pence halfpenny. Which is equivalent to what, two new p if that. You know, so, yeah magazines have gone up in price a bit since then.

Before we move onto things, could you just tell me, what came out of the factory at the end?

Yarn. It came out, it went from, mmm, yes what did come out of the factory at the end? That's a very good question. I know there was an area called warping, where they put lots of these milk bottles and then it was wound onto big beams. They didn't actually process fabrics and things at the nylon, that I know, that I'm aware of. I think it was just that they did the warp beams which they sent off to other places, and then they could make it up into fabric. You know, but yes, so it must have been the warp beams that came out, because I knew there was quite a big area for warping.

Sorry, what are the warp beams?

Warp beams, when you make a fabric, you've got a warp and a weft when you weave it. Right. So the warp beams are the long ones, and then the weft goes across it, it the short, the short threads, so and it went into carpets and it went into clothing and it went into making stockings in those days, not tights. Yeah, they did all sorts of different things. Curtains, yeah, but it was done, it wasn't done at that, that was just the raw material, it wasn't the actual finished product that they made there.

16:30

So how many of you worked there?

In the lab or in the factory?

In the whole factory...

About 5000. And it was, it went, oh, it started in 1947, I finished in '67 and I think it closed down in about '74, '75, maybe a bit later. I can't remember.

So, were they mainly women who worked there?

Oh gosh no. No, it was, in the lab we had men and women. There were a couple of sections that were mainly women, I think the office staff were mainly women, but the factory floor was mainly men. There was one area that was mostly staffed by women, on the factory floor, and that was the warping area, where the, you know, where the creels were done. But no, the majority of the people there, I would have thought, were men, on the actual factory floor. They didn't like women working shifts in those days. They didn't like women working nights. And I think the warping girls only worked two shifts, I don't think they worked a three, so they didn't like women working nights in those days.

Why was that then?

I don't know, I think the canteen staff worked nights, but I think women were thought to be too delicate to work nights in those days.

So how many of you worked in the labs, and you know, was the mainly women or was that a cross?

No that was a mix. We still go out with, some of the, I've kept in touch with a lot of my friends from the nylon, and we still go out to dinner a couple of times a year, and up until 12 month or so ago, two of the girls that used to [unclear 18:38] are actually blokes who used to work in the lab, which their families thought hilarious, because we always called them the girls. Unfortunately one of them has passed away and the other one is not very well, so we haven't seen Brian for a long time, but, we all used to muck in together, you know, the boys used to come up, they used to mainly work in the chem lab when they started, but they had to come up to see how the physical lab was run, because they used to work it on weekends, because we didn't often work weekends, well we didn't work Sundays, but the boys worked sort of a rota shift, where the girls didn't, so they used to have to keep going while we were there. So that was why we had to train the boys up, which was great fun because they could never tie knots in very thing yarn.

So you say, you were catching a bus down from Abertillery?

Yes.

Where did the workforce come from?

Oh gosh, all over the place. Abertillery and that valley, Blaenavon and the valley down, Usk way, Newport, Pontllanfraith, Blackwood, everywhere in the area. The buses, I used to live

down the road from where I live now, and from, there used to be a six till two shift in the morning, in the factory, then the maintenance staff used to come in, I think they used to start at half past seven for their shift, then staff used to be in at quarter to nine, and then the next shift would be six till two, then two till 10, then 10 till six. The maintenance staff used to finish about half past four. The staff used to finish at five o'clock, so you can imagine there was one constant stream of buses, and I can remember taking my son to a birthday party after I'd left work, getting caught in all the buses, and it took me 25 minutes to get two miles up the road, because of the buses, the constant flow of buses. My mother used to think it was wonderful, she used to love to sit there and watch all the buses going up and down the road. But yes, it was, quite different. And I mean there was no motorway then, it was quite a narrow road, it was only a double road, it wasn't the dual carriageway as it is now.

21:15

So how long would it take you to get to work?

Me? When I lived in Abertillery, I used to leave at eight to be in work by quarter to nine. When I got married I used to walk it in quarter of an hour. So you know, which was one of the reasons that my husband and I moved to Pontypool, because that was near for me to get to work, because I could walk it, and Bill used to work in Pontypool anyway, so it was convenient for both of us, you know. So, yes, but it was good, a good place to work, nice people.

Okay, so you worked in the lab. Did you mix with people from the shop floor, did you all mix together, or?

Oh yes, yes. I mean it was part of our job to go round the shop floor anyway, because we went round with this thing called Albert, so we spent a week every, we had a rota of doing it and it used to come up once every three months you'd go round the shop floor. A lot of girls from the lab married blokes who worked on the shop floor. I mean we weren't in an ivory tower, and you know, you got to know people, and you made friends, and yeah, you know, you were asked out for dates and one thing and another, and sometimes you went and sometimes you didn't.

Were you trained to work in the lab?

Oh yes, yes, they, you know when you went in first of all, you had someone with you to make sure you knew what you were doing. And especially down in the chem lab because you'd got all sorts of smellies and nasty things down there which you didn't have in our lab, which was just a physical, you know, we just tested the nylon.

Do you remember how long the training took?

Well I don't think it was a sort of formal training as such. I can't speak about the chem lab because I never worked there, but you were just put with somebody to learn a job, and then when you learnt that job you were moved to somebody else and we were taught how to do that, so it was a question of you picked it up by osmosis more than anything else. You know, you just, you picked it up as you went along. You were watched and obviously Mrs Crosby

would make sure that everything was alright before the results went out, and if there was anything wrong, you would hear about it. Believe me.

You mentioned your wages. Were those at the beginning of your, when did you start did you say?

'57.

'57. Were those wages...

No, sorry, '53.

Were those wages at the beginning of your work there?

The three pounds? Yes.

And did they go up... when?

Oh you had a rise every year. And when I left in '67, I was on, I think I was on about £12 a week when I left in '67, which was quite good money then. I was a section head when I left, of course I'd had the extra increment because of the responsibility.

So when were you first sort of promoted, do you remember?

Well, it's a long story. I was asked if I would go over to textile development department, which was a new area, because they were doing the same things as were in the test room, and they were short of staff and they borrowed a couple of us to keep them going while they trained more staff up. And we were there, we should have gone for a fortnight and my friend and I were there actually for six weeks. And we quite liked it. We'd moved out of the noisy area by this time, we weren't down in draw twist any more, they'd actually built us a lab upstairs which was quiet. You know, it was a proper area that you could work in. But anyway we went over to TDD and they had windows over there which they didn't have in main plant, so we could see what was going on in the outside world, which was good. Anyway, we were moved back to main plant, and then they said would any of us like to be transferred over, and I said well I didn't mind, so I was transferred over, and after I'd be there, oh it must have been about a 12 month, I was asked if I'd like to go onto a different section and gradually worked my way up, that in the end I had about six or eight girls working under me.

What did TDD stand for?

Textile development department. So they did a lot of different things. They were doing a lot of experimenting, making carpets, they were making the yarn for carpets. We also used to get wearing trials, it was when bri-nylon was coming in, and we would get samples from different companies, like Marks & Spencers and Ladybird, and we would test those poor garments to destruction. They would be cut from this and they would be cut from that, and

they would be done this to and done that to, just to make sure that it was worthy of the bri nylon label basically.

26:54

Can you remember some specific things you did to them?

We used to put them in a cabinet and shine lights on them to see how they faded, and they had to be washed so many times. If it was a waterproof fabric we had a water, we had sort of a rainmaking machine that they had to be rained on for goodness knows how many hours. Oh and they were stretched, they were put between clamps and they were stretched. Gosh, I can't remember anything else that we used to do. But it was, and it was something every day, and when it was when the new Hoovermatic washing machines came out and I think the poor man from Hoovermatic, we gave him a bed there I the end, because we worked that machine to death, and it was breaking like nobody's business. Put me off automatic washing machines for years after. I always had a twin tub and I swore I'd never have an automatic, because that poor machine was worked to death. But obviously I've got one now. But yes, it was all good fun and it was new friends I made and actually the money was better over there than it was in main plant, so it was another good reason to move.

Do you remember what the difference was?

About 10 or 15 pounds a year I think. It wasn't excessive, but even so it was a perk.

So you were supervising eight, about eight women?

Yes.

Do you remember how old you were then?

I was about 28, 30 I expect, something like that.

And did you enjoy that kind of responsibility?

Yes, I think so. I always got on well with the girls I worked with. I can't remember having quarrels with any of them. They were a nice team to work for. They knew what they were doing and they were fine. And I had two nice bosses, one was a Polish gentleman, came over after the war, and I was sent on different things for John. Would I go to the library and find him a Serbo-Croat and Polish dictionary? As you do, you know. Yes, okay, I'll see what they've got. I did manage to find one up there actually, so there we are. But yeah, he was a nice chap and he moved to, oh gosh, he went back up to Nottingham somewhere to work, but he was a nice bloke, and then my new boss then after John had left was a chap called Vic (???) he was Irish, but he was great. So yes, as I said, I met some very nice people and I'm still friends with many of them, which is good. After all these years.

Do you remember any kind of incidents that happened that were quite funny, or you know, memorable?

There was one very sad one. When I was in TDD they were people going up to Doncaster. They opened a lot of new factories. They opened one in Gloucester, they opened one in Doncaster, they opened one in Australia, there was one in South Africa, there was one in New Zealand, because we all said, you know, the world can only put up with so much nylon. Are we going about this the wrong way because it's going to be overloaded, and I think that's probably what happened and why ICI eventually went through, but, they sent about four or five of the lab assistants up to Doncaster by helicopter, and sadly the helicopter crashed and they were all killed. So that was a downer, because I did know all of those and that was... it was very sad. But yeah, you know, we had fun, we had Christmas parties and dances and all sorts of things. I remember they had an exhibition there once. They said they were going to do it in a tent, so we said, yes, well you want a flipping big tent, you know to put this exhibition in. And when we got there it was one of these blow up tents, it all worked on an air compressor. Never seen anything like it before, it was huge. And they had all the exhibitions and all the rest of it in there that they would do.

An exhibition of what then?

Oh, I think it was an exhibition of what work went on in the factory and the things that they did and all the rest of it, you know, but that was quite interesting. I was there all day for a couple of days. In the tent.

And do you remember when that was?

No I can't. I can't honestly remember when it was. In the 60s I would have thought.

Where was the factory exactly?

Just down the road from where we live.

Right. And is it still there?

Yeah, factory's still there. It doesn't belong to them now. ICI went through but before then it had been taken over by a Turkish company. I think they made, you know this black stuff that you put on the garden to keep the weeds down. I think they made that there. And, as far as I know, they still do. I don't know what else they do there now because it's, half of it, it's, the one main plant just belongs to that and the other places belong, the offices and everything, I think the police are in one, and the area health are in another and, you know, because it's all split up now, it's not the same any more obviously.

And it doesn't, does it employ as many people?

Oh gosh, no. I was talking the chap that came out to dinner with us, Brian, who actually worked there up until he retired. Oh, no, he didn't retire, he was made redundant when this Turkish fella, firm took over. And then they rang him up a couple of weeks later and asked would he like to go back on a consultancy basis, and he said yes please, because I think it was more lucrative. And he used to go out to Turkey quite a lot, but I think he said there were only about three or four hundred working there. I couldn't be sure.

33:50

Did you have any perks from working in the factory?

You got two free pairs of stockings a year. That was it. That was your Christmas present. You got two pairs of stockings a year. And they were usually Kayser Bondor or something like that. They were nice stockings, but there were two pairs a year. And you got them in a little box which was nice. And where we were, we used to get wearing {??} trials occasionally because we were sort of that end of the system, and I had jumpers and I had blouses, I mean, jumpers knitted nylon jumpers, you know. And blouses and I had one beautiful pea-green dress and literally it was pea-green. And I would only ever wear it work as I could put my overall on over it and nobody could see it. Oh dear, I still remember that pea-green dress, yes.

Were there any unions in the factory?

Yeah, we did join a union. What was it? Chemical workers union or something like that. Which was sort of brought to our attention by one of the chaps working in the lab. Anyway, we were yeah okay, we'll join this union. I think it was three pence a week or something like that, then we found out that after they'd got us a pay rise, we decided we didn't want to play any more so that was it. It folded. We all resigned. I think we only joined for about six months until they got us a pay rise and that was it. But I mean, whether the shop floor had unions and things, I have no idea.

Were you aware of any problems or strikes or anything like that going on?

Only one strike I can ever remember. And I can't remember what it was for. I can remember going, because ICI was such a big building, there were huge corridors everywhere, and I can remember walking up the corridor and all the shift workers were sitting on the floor. They'd all gone in, I don't know whether they'd walked out while they were actually in work, but they were all sitting on the floor of the corridor, but what it was over I have no idea. I mean, we're going back what 50, 60 years, and your memory fails when you get to that age.

Were you involved?

No, gosh, no. It was just the shift workers, they'd all walked out, for some reason.

Do you feel on the whole the workers were treated fairly?

Oh yeah, I think it was a very happy place to work. A couple of friends of mine, their husbands worked on the shop floor, and they always seemed to be, you know, quite content. Whether they were or not, but I mean I never heard Pat complain about anything. He was always you know quite happy. And my husband's uncle worked, he was a fitter there. My husband's aunt worked in the canteen, you know, and they always seemed to be quite upbeat about what they were doing.

Did they get on with the management and...?

You didn't see much of the management. They used to be upstairs in the main plant. They had their offices, and the only time I ever saw management was when I was taking results up. You know, you'd go up to the offices and, at the bottom of the stairs there was a big board which said, Mr so and so, and if he was in, it was marked in, and if he was out, he'd slid it across and he was out. But I mean you didn't see anybody, it wasn't the management you saw, it was their secretaries and things. But it was only when I was taking sheets up with results on, you know, that was the only contact we had with.

But you got on with your, say, superiors then?

Oh yes, yes. Yeah, obviously there were chaps in the office that were looking for the results that we were doing, but on a Christmas time we were all in concerts together and one thing and another, you know, so we knew them all on first name basis. So yeah, it was fine.

Was there any kind of pressure there, you know, about getting results and stuff?

Not as much as probably there would be today. You know, I've worked in different things since I left BNS and the pressure was far more recently, that it was 40, 50 years ago. You just did your own thing and got on with it. You were told what to do and you did it, and everybody was happy, so, yeah.

You mentioned that you wore a uniform over your pea-green dress?

No, an overall.

An overall?

An overall.

So was there a uniform for anybody?

No, you only wore a uniform because some of the machines got oily, so an overall rather, because some of the machines were oily, the fitters would come up you know, and they'd oil the machines and for the first two days everything was covered in oil, including the girls.

Was the protective clothing provided by?

Oh yes, the overalls were provided. When I started there, they were the white cotton overalls, but then they were updated and they were blue nylon ones which, you could imagine, with the temperature in there at about in the, you know, quite high, they were rather warm and when we moved upstairs especially, we had a cloakroom, and most of the girls would go into the cloakroom and you'd just have your underwear and your overall on, you wouldn't wear anything under the overall, you know. But, and make sure you kept it buttoned up when the boys were about.

39:54

So the conditions. You've mentioned the noise and the heat. I mean, were the conditions an issue?

Not really. I don't think so. You just accepted it. You worked in a factory environment and that was what the conditions were. There were people in different areas who worked in far worse conditions than you did. Like on extrusion floor. And you know, you just got on with it. If you worked in the warehouse where all the bobbins and things were packed, it was cold. You know it was far cold.

So it wasn't sort of taken up as an issue with anybody?

I don't think so. I don't think health and safety and all the rest of it was in the forefront then, as it is now. I mean, half the things we used to get up to, health and safety would have a dicky fit about. You know, because we used to have a lot of fun. And we used to do things I know we shouldn't have done, but we did, and we got away with it. But yeah, it was good, it was a nice place to work.

Was the work dangerous in any way, do you think?

Oh yes. On the cerimeter (?????)...

Sorry, could you explain what?

Yeah, the cerimeter (???) was where you tested the yarn for the strength, right, you fastened it at the top and you fastened it at the bottom and it ran down, and then it went up on a pointer and it was, it would show you the breaking strength of it and you recorded that, and one of my friends bent down one day, and she caught her hair in the worm on the cerimeter (??) and she pulled all her hair out, all the front of her hair. So that was interesting to say the least. And she did have to wear a hair piece for a while after that. Until her hair grew back, but whether she ever got compensation for it or anything like that, which she probably would have sued the company for thousands, I think she just said, well, I shouldn't have bent down so near the machine and that was the end of it. You know. I mean she obviously had to go and fill forms in and what have you, but I don't think she ever got anything for it.

Did they do anything about that?

I think they put a guard on it, I think they put a guard on it after that. But yeah, poor old Josie, she was a bit bald in the front after that for a while.

So no compensation as far as you know?

I wouldn't have thought so, but I can't say, I don't know, never discussed it with her. I mean, you didn't in those days. But compensation, you know.

Do you think your health suffered in any way from?

No, no. I mean there was a surgery on site. They had a sister, a sister there, in fact they had two sisters there. And they had a doctor on site. So if you weren't well or you, you know, you had an accident or anything, there was always some medical staff on site, and if it was something they couldn't deal with, well you were whipped off to Neville Hall, and that was it, you know.

What about your hearing? Did it affect your hearing in any way?

No. No I'm lucky it didn't, you know.

Were you aware of anybody else's hearing being affected?

I would assume that some people were affected, especially the blokes who actually worked on the draw twist machines. But as I said, they weren't given ear protectors or anything in those days, because you didn't. You know. [unclear 43:30]

What about the facilities? You know, toilets, canteen?

Oh, canteen was excellent, and the toilet facilities were brilliant. There were lots of toilets and hand basins scattered all over the place. And you were allowed 10 minutes in the morning, before you went to lunch, to go and you know, there was no, oh you couldn't go to the loo or anything at certain times, you could go when you wanted to as long as you, you know, told somebody where you were going, and you weren't hours and hours and hours. But you were allowed 10 minutes before you went to lunch to smarten yourself up, and you were allowed 10 minutes in the afternoon before you finished that you could go and smarten yourself up before you went home. So there was always facilities like that. The canteen was excellent. I think you could have probably got a three-course meal for about the equivalent of about 25p today. If not cheaper than that. Do you know, I can't remember. There were different grades of restaurant. I mean, we went to the worker's canteen, because we were in main plant, but if you worked in the offices there was sort of a higher grade where you had waitress service. I did go there occasionally when I got to TDD. And so you had waitress service there, which was very nice.

45:09

So were anybody allowed to go anywhere to, you know did you have to be a certain grade to go to the canteen with the waitress service?

No, I just had friends who went to the canteen with the waitress service, so I went with them occasionally. But that was more expensive. I think that was five shillings.

So, what about breaks? You know, you said had 10 minutes to smarten up. What about morning breaks, lunch breaks?

Oh yeah, we had a tea trolley come round with coffee in one urn and tea in another and the tea lady's name was Dorothy. She was brilliant. And they used to bring filled rolls and cakes. More filled rolls in the mornings, and then in the afternoons you'd have cakes, and I think a cup of tea and a cake was sixpence or something like that. You know, it was silly prices, compared with what everything is today. But yeah, you got your break morning and afternoon regularly.

How about lunch? How long did you have for lunch?

I think it was half an hour. Or could be three quarters, I can't remember. Yeah, I think it was three quarters. We sort of went from half 12 to quarter past one, or you know, but they were all staggered, they were different, you know, you either went at that time and then left by time that the next people could go in, because there were a lot of people to feed.

Yes, and was the time of your working day, did it, you said you started at quarter to nine?

Yes.

And when did you finish?

When I started there first of all I used to finish at half past five. But then they, in their wisdom, they decided then we could finish at five o'clock, so it was quarter to nine to five o'clock. But I mean you had a break in the morning, you had lunch and you had a break in the afternoon, so, you know.

Did you have to clock in?

No. Staff didn't clock in. The workforce clocked in, the works on the work face, they clocked in. But the staff didn't.

And you could... you say you could chat while you were working?

Oh gosh yes.

Except for the noise...

Except for the noise. But I mean when we were upstairs it wasn't noisy, so yeah you, yes, you chatted all day.

Did you play music and things like that?

No. Not in the factory, no.

Did they play music on the floor? Did you?

You wouldn't have heard it.

You wouldn't have heard it. That loud. So, sorry, okay, how many days did you work a week?

Five.

Five....

Occasionally we worked a Saturday, we had a rotary system and we would work then on a Saturday morning, but that was only sort of nine till 12 on a Saturday but on bank holidays and over Christmas depending on how much work was in, there was a skeleton staff and we used to work six till two, which was, I didn't like getting up that early in the morning. I still don't. But we worked six till two then, on a very rare occasion. It was only once or twice a year that we worked six till two, the girls.

Was that overtime?

Oh yeah, you got overtime for it. Oh yeah, you got extra pay for that, yeah, because you were working bank holiday.

Right. Did you ever work later and get overtime for that?

No. We finished at five.

But the men would work?

But the men did yeah, the boys in the lab did, they worked three shifts.

And what about an annual holiday, did you have pay?

Oh yeah.

An annual holiday with pay?

Yeah.

How long was that?

Two weeks.

And can you tell me about that? When was it, or could you choose it or was it a set?

Now then, oh gosh, do you know I think we used to have a shut down. Do you know, I can't remember. I've got an idea we used to have it shut down, they used to shut down for a week to do maintenance and things. I think we used to have one week shut down and one week we could choose when we wanted it, you know, but as I said, I can't remember.

Where did you go on holiday?

Where did we go on holiday? Well it wasn't foreign holidays in those days. And at that age, when I started working at the nylon, I went with my parents and we went caravanning and it was usually Saundersfoot or Lavernock or somewhere like that, you know. Nowhere exotic.

You'd go to a static caravan then?

Yes, with my parents.

How about later on? Did you ever go on holiday with the girls from work?

No I didn't, no I didn't. Because I was married when I was 20 you see, so it wasn't that far from leaving school until the time we got married, so I left school in '53, met Bill in '55, '54, we were married in '57 so you know, but we still went caravanning because we had our own van then.

50:58

Were you allowed days off for personal reasons? I don't know whether, you know like funerals, or, you know was that allowed?

Fortunately I never had the find out that because I didn't have any deaths when I was working there, so I don't know, but I would imagine they would, you know because they were a very caring company to work for.

Yes, I was going to ask you, you felt that they were a good company to work for?

Oh yeah, yeah, excellent.

So... the social life then. Were any social activities organised by the workers?

Oh good grief. It was one long social life! There were dances and we had, when I started there they had a small clubhouse, 1960-ish they opened a big clubhouse the other side of the road, the other side of the main road, which had one of the biggest ballrooms in South Wales I think. It was huge. And it was a beautiful building. It had all sorts of places downstairs, there was a rifle range and there was, they used to have judo lessons, we used to have judo classes there, judo club, they had the ballroom which was a sprung floor which was wonderful, a huge stage, grand piano, restaurant there, a couple of bars, and there was always something going on there. Bill and I used to go there, they used to have, music and drama, no music and film, and you'd get offbeat films. We saw *The Wild Ones* there before it was issued. With Marlon Brando. It wasn't allowed to be out in the cinema, but we saw it there. And we went to see John Ogden, pianist, we went to see Campoli the violinist, we went to see Leon Goossens the um....

Oboe player....

Oboe player, that's right. They had big orchestras there, my dad was a house band there for a long time, who sort of played when the big bands wanted a break, dad would take his, you know, his band was there. And they had people like Ted Heath, Joe Loss, Felix Mendelssohn, Ken Cooper, you know, they had all the big bands there. Big companies come down from London. You know, it was a very organised, a very well-run thing. Christmas parties.

Sorry, before we go on to Christmas parties, were these, because I mean those are fantastic concerts aren't they, were they open to the public as well?

They were open to people who worked in the nylon and their families, so I mean you think, there's five thousand people working there, that's quite a catchment area really isn't it, you know?

How big was this place then?

What, the ballroom and things?

Yeah.

It was huge. Absolutely huge. I don't know what the capacity of it was, but I would imagine you'd get 500 people in there with no problem at all.

Did they put the classical concerts on in the ballroom as well?

They put the operas on in the ballroom. I remember going to see *Don Giovanni*, and that was in the ballroom, but the, I suppose it depended on how many tickets they sold, which room they used.

Do you remember who did the opera?

I think it was the Welsh Opera company, I don't think it was the Welsh National Opera Company, I think it was a smaller company, you know, it could have been a splinter company from that, but it was very good.

Professional?

Oh yeah, oh definitely, yeah, oh they didn't have any rubbish. Only dad's band.

And so there was a separate cinema as well was there?

I don't think there was a separate cinema as such, but they had, you know, they had one of the screens that they could put up if they wanted to, but it was very good, we often went to the pictures.

It sounds very cultural.

I think they tried to encourage things like that, you know. It was fun, and it was educational and it was, you know, it was good.

Great. So tell me then about, you were going to tell me about the Christmas parties.

Oh, the Christmas parties, yeah. We always had one for the PTL. You had to book weeks in advance when you wanted the room. And yeah, they were interesting. It was good fun. They had concerts and they had people on the stage, throwing themselves around, and you used to think, god, he's my boss, and look at the silly arse. But yeah, they were good fun. I remember two of my friends dressing as snowballs, that was good. And there was also, there were children's parties, because each shift, and there were four shifts, A B C and D, and then there was, they had the children's parties, and the factory workers would have children's parties, the maintenance people would have children's parties, and then in the summer they'd have an open day where they'd have a funfair and races and all sorts of things you know. (phone rings in background). It was you know, it was a real family-orientated place to work, they always took care of the families.

57:04

So did you go to these parties and open days?

Oh gosh yes. We used to have fun, and we used to have special dinners in the canteen on a Christmas time. We'd all be sitting there with silly hats on. You know, but yes, oh yeah we used to go to the dances and we used to go to the, there was always a New Year's Eve dance, but that was evening dress. They used to like you to, it was full evening dress then. They used to like you to go in evening dress for the New Year's eve parties, dances. And each

section would have its own, its own party for Christmas. I always remember going to one and, one of my friend's husbands was a bit of a lad, and he'd had one or two more than he should have done. We'll do a conga. Okay. So we did a conga. And we came out of the room that we were in and we went all through the others. Well, we opened a door, the ballroom could be divided off you see. So we didn't know what was going on in half of the ballroom, so we opened the door and it was accounts department, and accounts department in those days were a little bit starchy, so we conga'd all the way around accounts department having their Christmas party. We heard after that was the best part of the night they'd had. So that was quite fun. But there was always something going on, yeah the parties were good.

So did everything happen in the clubhouse or round the factory?

Oh yeah, there was, I think they used to go off on outings and things like that, you know, they would take them off on outings, but I never got involved with that. But yeah, there was the main plant and then there was the big clubhouse, and there was a ground around the clubhouse where they used to have football and cricket and all that sort of thing, you know, so it was outdoor sports as well. They had quite a good cricket team, you know, so yeah.

Amazing. Is there any one event which you remember in particular, you know, a visit by a famous person or something?

How about the Queen? Is that famous enough for you?

Tell me about it then.

The Queen was coming, right, okay. Now we've only got so many seats, they built a stand opposite the entrance where the Queen was coming and we've only got so many seats in the stand, so I think all of our lot applied. And we all got tickets, which was nice. So we said, oh well that was good. Funnily enough, they had exactly the amount of tickets for the people who had applied so I don't know whether that was coincidence or whether it was worked, but we filled the stands anyway. And she came, and she was very gracious and, not one of my, not a lady who worked at the nylon, but Gwen, who was one of my WI members, was a florist at Harrods and had come to live locally and she'd actually made the bouquet that the Queen was being presented with. So that was Gwen's claim to fame. And then my husband, when I came home that night, because the Queen had to go past our house, and Bill had come home from work and was stood on the gate with the cat in his arms, and it had the royal wave from the Queen, which he was quite, he said, she waved at the cat. But yeah, that was quite interesting. The Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh came.

Would you say, you know, that you enjoyed working at the factory?

I loved it.

Were you ever bored?

Oh gosh no. You didn't have time to be bored. But I'm not a bored person anyway, but no, you never had time to be bored. It got a little monotonous on times if you were sitting there, especially when you were doing the slub analyser, and you were sat in the dark watching all these threads coming through, you know. But you used to sing. And there were two up one end and three at the other, so you usually had company, you could shout to each other or you could sing with each other or, you know, there was always some noise coming out from the slub area.

Do you remember what you used to sing?

No. That's a long time ago. What was ever going and what was ever current in the 50s and 60s you know. I mean it was before the Beatles. I think Elvis was king then. And Cliff. Oh, Cliff of course.

When did you leave and why did you decide to leave?

Well I was six months pregnant at the time so I thought it was a good idea. I mean the surgery was good but I don't think they'd ever have them deal with childbirth. So that was when I left when I. '67.

'67?

I left in April '67.

How did you feel about leaving?

I was sad to leave but there again it wasn't BNS any longer. ICI had taken over.

Oh, when did that happen?

I've got an idea it was the January, of that year, or could have been the year before. It could have been 1966 or 1967, I can't remember, but I think they took over on the 1st January so it wasn't quite the same.

62:40

What was different do you think?

I don't know, I think it could have been run by accountants. And I mean there were a lot of people who were made redundant when they took over. And when they were made redundant, that was it. Especially a couple of the boys who were sort of in the upper echelon of knowing what was going in the works and all the rest of it. They were asked to leave, and their desk was cleared for them because they didn't want them to take anything out from the factory that they shouldn't have taken out. And if you know about that, it sort of left a nasty taste. But yeah. So, yeah I was sorry to leave but in a way I was you know, I had other things to think about then didn't I.

Were you given a party or a gift?

Oh yes, yes, and I had a presentation of the baby clothes and all the cards, and um, I was looking at some a few years ago now and it was all these names and I was thinking, who the heck was that. And when you got married you had a presentation, there was always a collection for you. I had a lawnmower when I got married. That was what I had for a wedding present.

Was that your choice?

Oh yes, yes. Oh you gave you the money, and you could buy what you wanted to.

Oh right.

Yeah. A lawn mower and a kitchen timer. And you took whatever you bought in, so I thought well I'm not struggling down the road with a lawn mower so I just took the kitchen timer in. Is that all you got?

And so, did you do anything afterwards? I mean after you had children, did you go back to work?

Oh right, I see what you mean. Well, my husband had his own business, we had a garage and petrol station and then in, Howard was about 10, about 1982, I decided that I was fed up with being his wife and their mother and I wanted a bit for me, so I went to work for a market research company, and I worked for them for 23 years and I ended up as a deputy regional manager for a market research company. Which was good. That was another job which I loved. And I worked until I was 68.

Wow. So you're still in contact with your former workmates you said?

From the nylon? Yes, yes. We go out to lunch...

And what kind of thing do you do when you go out?

Eat. We usually go out for a meal. Some of them are quite elderly, one of them is 83/84, and some of them are not very well. You see, when they were in the nylon, they were all very active and they played hockey and they did this and they did that. Me, I was a couch potato, I didn't do anything, and I think I'm the fittest out of the lot of us. Because all that wear and tear on joints. Yes, they say it's wonderful to keep active when you're young, and it is, I've got no agreement, you know, no disagreement with that at all, but I think you do put a lot of pressure on your body and yes, some of them are not so well as they might have been. They've all had hip replacements and knee replacements and what have you. And touch wood, I haven't yet.

So looking back then, how do you feel about the time you spent working in the factory?

It was great, it was good fun, and as I said, I met some lovely friends and we are still friends, 60 years further on, so you can't say there's much wrong with that, can you? So yeah, it was a smashing place to work.

Okay, thank you very much. (pause in recording).

67:03

So I'll just ask you then about the training film you were in.

Well, I think it was a training film. I'm saying it was a training film because my neighbours next door's son saw it, when he went to work at the nylon. Because he came home and he said, I saw a film with aunty Sheila on today, so I'm assuming that was on the induction course, but it was me in TDD in the wet lab, looking at strips of fabric in the light meter, you know, with the current beehive hairdo and the cat's shaped, cat's eye glasses, so, and a blue overall. But what happened to it after that, I did see it when it was first brought out, but there was a lot on that about what went on in the labs and one thing and another so, yeah, so Malcolm came home and said he'd seen aunty Sheila on a film. Which was quite a surprise.

Do you remember if it was black and white or colour?

No, it was colour. It was in colour.

Do you remember when it was? Maybe the blue overall will give you a...

It was when I was in TDD so it would have been in the 60s. Yeah, it would have been in the 60s.

And do you remember how long it was?

What, the actual film or the bit that I was in?

The actual film.

No, I can't remember, I think it was about half an hour, and the bit that I was in was about, 20 seconds. Not long at all.

That's the way it goes.

It is, yes. My claim for fame didn't last 15 minutes.

Can I ask you then about... you said there was... they had a newspaper?

Yes, call the Signpost. And that was printed every week. I think it was a penny or something or two pence, it wasn't very expensive anyway, coppers. And, but it gave you what was going on in the factory, who'd got married, who'd left to have babies, and you know things like that, and there was usually a photograph of the section that they were being presented with baby clothes or wedding presents and things like that. And who'd won the football matches, and the hockey team and the cricket team and the rugby team, you know, what was generally going on in the factory.

And who wrote these, who wrote in the newspaper?

Oh anybody could write in the newspaper. I think they had people who, you know, who did that, that was their job, but it was always one way of finding out what was going on. It got my fame to glory in that one when I, we got snow, it must have been '62, and it started snowing at about 12 o'clock and the shift buses went out at two o'clock and the afternoon buses went out at half past four-ish, and the staff buses went out at five o'clock, and of course I only lived quarter of an hour's walk from the factory, and at 11 o'clock that night, I still had people knocking the door because could they use the toilet and was there any hope of a cup of tea, because they'd been sitting on the buses since two o'clock and they hadn't got two miles up the road. Because of the snow. And that was interesting. I had four people staying overnight, two of the girls that worked with me in the lab, who'd gone home early because they were from Blaenavon and my mother's next door neighbour's son who actually worked in the council offices in Pontypool, had tried to walk from Pontypool to Abertillery and failed, and had walked back and come out to me which is two miles outside the other side of Pontypool so he didn't get there till about half past nine. And he'd left work at four o'clock, so, yeah there was a piece in the Signpost that I'd been feeding people with tea and sympathy for a couple of hours.

Do you remember what year that was?

I think it was '62, I think it was '62. I've probably still got the Signpost here somewhere, and if I find it I'll let you know.

It would be great if you could.

It's probably in a drawer with the photographs I can't find.

Okay, well thank you very much.

That's alright, you are very welcome.

71:39

END OF INTERVIEW/DIWEDD CYFWELIAD.