

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI

HG Stone, Pilkington Glass, Burton's Biscuits

Interviewee: VSE017 James (Jim) Noel Davies,
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Interviewer: Catrin Edwards on behalf of the Women's Archive of
Wales / Archif Menywod Cymru

Jim Davies was born in Pontypool, within a stone's throw of the HG Stones factory. He talks about being the chairperson of the old person's complex where he now lives in Bedlinog and about being an environmental campaigner.

01:52

JD says his parents were teachers, his mother in the girls' grammar school and his father in the boys' grammar school. They met in the Cymmrodorion Society, the Welsh speakers' society in Pontypool. There weren't many Welsh speakers in Pontypool except the immigrants from the Welsh speaking heartlands. He talks about the Welsh language in Pontypool and where his parents came from, and his parents and grandparents' Welsh speaking background in Cil-y-Cwm and Barry. His parents stopped speaking Welsh to him when he was 4 and when his sister was 7.

5:59

His parents lived near the school in Blaen Dare and then came down to Ruth Road which was quite a posh road. He talks about other 'posh' people who lived in the area. He found out later that about 10 people in the road spoke Welsh, but they didn't know it at the time.

07:53

JD and his sister went to New Inn primary school which was half a mile away from his home. It was regarded as a good school. He then went to West Mon grammar school

which was an ex public school and remained in the Haberdasher's group. He talks about the Haberdasher's group. He says he was lucky because "it was pretty slack and I enjoyed school immensely." He talks about the school. He says that he left school and went on to St Catherine's college Cambridge, to read medicine. He talks about his education, his family and behaviour. He says he also got into Oxford and it would have been better if he went to Oxford. He talks on about his education.

12:52

At the end of his second year in Cambridge, he went to work in HG Stone 'the toy factory' in the holidays because he needed some money. It was also just 200 yards from the house. He knew the factory and a few people who worked there, so he went to ask them whether they had any work. He says that in those days there was a lot of work available. They put him to work in the patent room. That was early July of 1956 when he was 18 and a half years old. There weren't very men down there. He reckons there were 8 or 10 women to every man. There was one man in the patent room with him - Gordon Denning from Bryn Mawr. People came from quite a long way away to the factories and there were special buses. The task was to work with the chief designer of the toys. He remembers the designer well. She was rather glamorous and aged about 40. He doesn't think she was married because she was known as Miss Biggs (?). She designed the toys and she designed them in parts to make the outside skin of the toy. Every limb would be a separate piece of cloth. They went through the patent room. The patent room received a drawing of the part (e.g. teddy bear's leg) They then drew the part on to plywood., then they wood put a metal band around the line of the limb. Then they would cut around the metal part and a handle was placed on the other part. They then had a handle, plywood and the metal piece, then that was ready to go to the stamping area. It was mainly women in the stamping area. They would have large pieces of cloth and they would stamp out the shape on the cloth. Then it would go to the cutters and the cutters would cut the shape out. The skill for the cutters was not to waste any cloth. It was very economic - nothing was wasted. The men weren't on the lines. The lines were mainly women. He says that they didn't have belts (in the line?) but they had tables. The parts would go to the stitchers - several body parts - and they would stitch it up. But that wouldn't be one woman. It was assembled by many. Eventually it would come out and the sewers had assembled the skin of the animal then it would go to the stuffers, and the stuffers would stuff it and then they'd add the eyes, nose etc. Then the toy would go for inspection.

19:58

He doesn't remember any of the animals because they only handled the plywood. But the teddy bears were well know and prized.

20:36

JD says that he didn't have an interview for the job when he went there. He thinks someone told him that there were jobs going. They knew the incinerator man, Cecil

Smith, and another man from chapel. He doesn't know why they were taking people on at that particular time. maybe because some were on holiday. He says again that when he was in school and in college getting work in local factories was straightforward. The post war boom was just beginning.

22:17

JD says that he loved it there. He never had any difficulties or problems with mixing although he was "from a totally different social class from most of the girls." Most of the women had been to the secondary modern school. He says they were all very nice and decent. He says there didn't seem to be an anti-student feeling and they seemed to like him as well. The men tended to be the supervisors, and the machinery technicians etc. The men were quiet and didn't throw their weight around and JD can't remember any difficult relationships between men and women at all. He says the atmosphere was very good. Then he says of course he was a young man and there were a lot of young women his age there, so there was guaranteed to be some fun. The young women would make and excuse to come to the room to see what he was like. He says it was all good fun. There was a fair amount of teasing going on between the men and the women but he can't remember anything nasty happening. He says right from the word go it was a very nice place to work. Miss Biggs (the designer) would 'float around the factory' and Mr Stone the boss, but there was no tension he didn't feel they were treated badly or pushed around. He talks about Miss Biggs and why she made such an impression.

26:26

The women all wore green overalls. He doesn't remember whether they had to wear an overall. The other men wore 'some kind of brown coat.' He had a feeling that they in the patent room didn't have to. He says he didn't receive any training. But imagines if he couldn't do it he wouldn't have been given the job. They did have to ge a certain amount done but he wasn't aware of a pressure in that factory as he's seen in many other factories. He can't recall that the girls on the lines had their heads down all the time. Nonetheless there was still a flow. He says he wasn't aware of time and motion studies. He then says he may have got a rosy view because there was a wall between them and the factory floor. The main room had 6 lines which were maybe 20 yards long. He says that they had to open a door to go there. He says he wasn't aware of having to get through a certain amount of work. He says it was easy going and there was always time for a chat.

"The girls used to come in great droves during breaks, lunch etc. and we could chat to the outside and chat we did - plenty of banter there. It was steady work and it was real work but it was not high pressure."

31:55

He differentiates between 'mature women' and 'girls'. "Many of the women on the lines were women of 40/50 years of age", but he saw more of 'the girls' and he doesn't know quite where they fitted in, whether they were on the lines or had special jobs on the lines

that weren't quite so demanding. He imagines that the final stitching 'getting the animal together' was a bit more intricate than other jobs, where all you had to do was sew one thing to another. He's sure there were different gradations of skills there.

32:55

He doesn't remember how much he was paid every week, but he says that he had a 'proper' grant to go to university. He says that if you were careful you could live on it, so the job money was like pocket money. So he says it was adequate for him but he can't comment on how it would be for anyone else. He says he wasn't aware if there was a union in the factory which was different to when he worked in Glasgow, when he was union convenor.

34:30

When asked if he had to clock in and out, he says that he can't remember. He says he can remember clocking in at Weston's Biscuits but Stones seemed a relaxed place. He says the conditions weren't very nice. There was the sound of sewing machines but he can't remember any moving belts so it wasn't very noisy. He can't remember any music. He says in Westons biscuits, the tannoy music was a big thing e.g. Housewife's Choice. That was crucial in the morning and there'd be other programmes during the day.

37:00

JD had a couple of flings with a few of the girls. he doesn't remember going out with a crowd of women as friends. He can't remember any functions. In work he regarded them as friends. He can't remember a canteen so it's possible he went home for lunch but he doesn't think so. He can't recall any of the facilities. However he remembers that there were a number of disabled people in the factory. They were on the 'green card' scheme a government sponsored scheme. His friend Gordon who worked with him was a Green Card man.

39:41

When asked if he stayed doing exactly the same job, he says yes he did. 'Each part was different and there were lots of parts so it wasn't as if you were just bent over tacking on the ribbons to the shape and it was the same shape and the same place - it wasn't like that. There were different shapes, different animals, different toys and there wasn't a line system, there wasn't even a belt in our room, just a table. It was all really very civilised. I know it was much less hard than the biscuit factory for example." He did find the work boring, but the opportunity to stop and chat was 'profound.' They weren't supervised closely, they didn't have a foreman. He likes chatting a lot and it was an opportunity to chat to people from a very different background to his own. Before he worked in factories he hadn't really come across ordinary working class people. He thinks there was a bit of class tension in the grammar school between him and some working class boys, but that was partly because he was regarded as a teacher's pet

because he was called by his first name, Jim. He talks at length about this and disputes at camp.

43:35

He enjoyed his time in the factory but when asked whether he would have liked to have stayed there rather than go back to college he says "No - that was never a serious option." He talks about his uncle's shop at Blackwood Jones and Richards and how he could have worked there, but he laughed at the suggestion. He says he was very academically biased.

46:16

When asked if he learnt anything in Stones he says it started to increase his awareness. But he says it was in other factories that he saw what he would call 'slave labour.' And those experiences were more profound. He realised there really were two classes of people. He didn't get that in Stones.

47:39

He worked in another factory before he worked in Stones. He worked in Westons biscuit factory. Their big slogan was 6 million eaten every day. They made specialities like Wagon Wheels and export biscuits. There was a beautiful smell in the factory. He says all the factories had factory buses going to them from long distances away. He remembers he had to get up early and catch a bus at 6.45, early for him. He says it was warm when they got to the factory which was lovely. He was one of the yard boys, and they had a specific job. The biscuits went out in a tin and the empty tins came back. They had to dib the corners of the tins with a heavy implement and then squash them flat with the iron pole. Then the flattened cans were put back in the scrap for scrap metal. He says it was hard work. There was a supervisor who was a tough egg so there was no messing about. He wasn't particularly strong and he remembers that they had to take the empty boxes off the lorry, 4 in each hand. They also had to do the whole process quite quickly. He says "This was tough going. It was the first time I had to do anything like this in the way of routine work." Sometimes the lorry would get stuck and they'd get to the yard and there'd be nothing to do. He talks about the 'good craic' the boys would have when this happened.

53:50

He says that the thing he remembers mostly is the music. First thing in the morning, housewife's choice and the whole factory would sing, led by the women. There was a better atmosphere inside than outside. He says the other thing about the factory was the class divide between the office staff and factory floor workers. JD says that the office workers would look down on them (the factory workers) and they in turn would look down on the office workers.

55:50

When asked how many women worked at the factory, JD says 150 - 200. He can't remember how many lines went at the same time, but they had sing-alongs in the morning. He talks about the family maid Dora Tovey, who looked after him when he was little, becoming a supervisor in Westons and being in charge of the record player. He says that the ratio of women to men was about 7:1. There was more heavy work in Westons like the making of the dough, fetch and carry, their little gang, the lorry drivers and mechanics. He says there was more drive there and no messing about. Although whenever the supervisor's back was turned there was a lot of messing about and a lot of biscuit scrounging.

59:50

When asked how did the factories compare, he says to him there was nowhere like Stones. He talks a little more about Dora Tovey and how good she was. He says it was harder there because it was faster and there was a class difference at Westons.

61:15

He says that he worked in Pilkington's glassworks in Pontypool over one holiday. He was a yard boy there again. the supervisors there were quite easy going but the work was hard and monotonous. The foreman made a difference, because he was easier on them. There were far fewer women there but there were women in the glass cutting operations. There wasn't a bad atmosphere there, you didn't get the impression that they were slave drivers however he says he wasn't in the glass manufacture. The glass had to be made and liquefied, and then it had to be brought in great curtains and cut into great panes. Then the panes were cut into individual orders. There was a lot of cutting and a lot of dangerous work. They had a doctor there and she would be there regularly, supervising and treating wounds, and looking at health and safety. He says there was security at the gate that he doesn't remember anywhere else.

63:55

When asked if these experiences had an effect on his life he says yes.
"I appreciated what hard monotonous work was like. I appreciated what it was like to be at the bottom of the pile. I appreciated what the sheer effort of getting to work and doing physical work was, and this was considerable. Then I remember learning about people who had a completely different background and a way of being and a way of talking and a way of doing... a certain frankness and openness which I admired, a certain freshness. met it of course in the Stones factory whilst among the girls, I had contact with the girls which I'd not had before and there was a directness and freedom of expression all of which I found very valuable. I broadened my understanding of human life as it was in the Eastern Valleys considerably, and that stood me in good stead for the rest of my life."

65:35 END OF INTERVIEW/DIWEDD CYFWELIAD