

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/LLEISIAU O LAWR Y FFATRI

Kayser Bondor – Merthyr Tudful, Thorns – Merthyr Tudful

Interviewee: VSE022 Anne Amblin

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Interviewer: Catrin Edwards on behalf of the Women's Archive of Wales / Archif Menywod Cymru

AA was born in a place called Pendarren which was called 'mushroom town' - 'the mush' in short. She asked why they called it that and they said "the houses went up so quick like mushrooms overnight." Her parents lived in the front room with his two sisters . Her father was 2 when his mother died and 12 when his father died and his sister brought them up in Dowlais. They all moved to Pendarren eventually and AA parents had the front room when they got married.

02:10

AA says that her father was a collier from the age of 14. Her mother worked in domestic service in London when she was young and then came back to Merthyr where she met her father. AA was the eldest of the children but when her parents moved out from Aunty Maggs and Aunty Annie's house to a place of their own, she stayed with her Aunties. She was very close to her unmarried Aunty Anne. It was a house where all the children came to and they were all brought up there because Aunty Maggs and Uncle Jack didn't have children.

03:48

Her Aunty Magg never worked outside the house. Uncle Jack worked in ICI. AA did the cleaning when she got older and Auntie Annie worked in the school canteen. When the other children were older, her mother worked as a domestic in St Tudful's hospital until she retired. She talks about St Tudful's hospital. AA has two sisters and a brother.

05:40

AA went to school in Gellifaelog School, Pendarren, two streets from where she lived. It was an infants and junior school. She remembers the first day at school and she thought it was never going to end. Eventually her aunt went to work in the canteen there. She didn't pass her 11+ so she went to Dowlais Central Girls' School. Her sister passed her 11+ and went to Castle County Grammar School.

7:07

AA left school when she was 16 and went straight to Kayser Bondor. There were so many factories in Merthyr that you could take your pick, but a lot of the girls went to Kayser Bondor "because it was a woman's thing ... lingerie and underwear." She thinks she was quite happy to leave school. It was her choice to go to Kayser Bondor. A lot of her friends were going there to work as well. "It was a job and in them days you went to work wherever you could. I was quite happy to go there. It was a nice place to work."

08:32

When asked if she had an interview for the job, AA says yes but she can't remember much about it, but she was interviewed by one of the senior women in the personnel department. She says she was trained in the training school, which were rooms that were in the factory. She says that you went there for 6 weeks - 2 months maybe. You were taught to operate the machines and to clean them. There were so many different machines for different parts of the job, different parts of the underwear. She says it was good training. There were supervisors there that showed you how to do the job. Then they put you out on the big factory floor, and that's where you stayed.

10:15

When asked to describe her first day she says that she was a little bit excited because it was the start of something new, coming out of school. She says she made friends, more with some than others. They stayed friends for a long time and they go out together and they go dancing together. She says it was a big factory but they started in the training room which wasn't so big. When they went on the factory floor it was a huge room and it was full of machinery and all the beautiful colours of the underwear. It was really clean because of the underwear. Lovely colours and the new designs that had come in. "It was quite a pretty place to work you know, it was nice and pleasant sort of thing." When asked whether she thought it was glamorous, she says that she thinks compared to other factories it would have been glamorous.

She said that they had a lovely canteen, the food was always nice. She says that was always something 'going on.' They'd organise inter-factory dances and 'go to Cardiff for that of course.' There'd be a big dance for the factories to get together.

12:24

When asked how many worked in KB, AA says a lot of women, mechanics who were men, and the cutters who were men. She says she can't remember how many women but there were a lot of women, hundreds. More women than men.

13:31

Once they were trained you had your own machine and that was your machine all the time. Once you went in in the morning, there was always bundles of work, tied up with a lot of tickets on them. She says whatever job you were on e.g. a petticoat, you opened the bundle, took the ticket off and did your job and when you'd finished your job on the bundle you cut your ticket off, tie the bundle back up and pass it on to the next part of the job. You saved the tickets up until the end of the day and the next day the girls would come out of the office and collect your tickets and they put down how many bundles that you'd completed and you got paid like that. There was a basic rate and then what you did was counted on top - piece work. Some jobs were easier and some jobs you could do quicker than others.

She says she can't remember what her first pay was before stoppages, but after stoppages it was £1/19/6d.

"I took it home in this pay packet, it was like yesterday I can remember it, and Aunty Magg had 10/-, so that left me with £1/9/6d or whatever. We had to keep bus fare for the week after to go to work, cause there were buses in those days there weren't many cars. So there was buses going up the valley where I lived and there was buses going down the valley taking girls home, so you had to keep your bus fare for the week and what was left I used up to go to the pictures or to go dancing. That would last me until the middle of the week and towards the end of the week I got the money off my Nan (Aunty Annie) and I'd give it her back on Friday when I got paid. I'd borrow it again the following week and give it her back again. This went on for ages til in the end my Nan said "you know that money - I don't know whether it's mine or yours. Keep it!"

She talks about the fact that her Aunty Annie never married, but she was strict.

17:12

She says that her wages went up over the years, the longer she'd been there and the more experienced she got. She thought that the basic wage probably went up every year and the piece work depended on how quickly you could do the job. She worked at KB until she had her first son Simon who was born in 1966. She says that they moved to Heol Gerrig in 1967, which was quite a way from Pendarren. She says that she went back to work part time when Simon was a bit older. Her Aunty Mag would look after him for a few hours. KB had moved from Pentre Bach up to Dowlais, so she could go to her Aunty Annie's drop Simon and walk up to the factory. She could walk back down to pick him up, catch the bus from Pendarren to Merthyr, and a bus from Merthyr to Heol Gerrig. She talks about trying to get the house warm with a coal fire.

20:06

AA says they made all sorts of underwear - bras petticoats, slips, nightdresses etc. She says that they were made so well and they were such good quality that they lasted for years and years. They made lingerie for M&S and they were very fussy.

"It was always clean the factory, and you had to clean your machines every night when you'd finished work, clean it all down and oil it ready for next day. It was always kept clean. There were elderly men who were sweeping around the floor keeping it clean all the time. But you knew when Marks was coming because it was extra clean.... They'd go round and inspect everything and one little thing they didn't like or fault, that would be it. So they were always a little bit more fussy."

M&S would send buyers to see what they wanted while the workforce would still be working.

22:12

AA says that they had a little shop and if anything was not quite perfect or 'nqps' as they called them, would be sold cut price. They had examiners who examined the garment after it was made and if it wasn't quite perfect it would be stamped 'NQP'. The women could buy them cheaper from the factory shop.

23:09

AA remembers having Manikin parades. The girls who worked on the factory floor would take part, wear the underwear and show it off. Buyers would come and members of the public could go. She says that the girls liked taking part in the parades. She doesn't remember whether they were given what they wore as a gift. She didn't do one herself. She thinks that they took place in the factory canteen and they had them in Howells and David Morgan's in Cardiff and places like that. She says there was an old photo in the Merthyr Express last year (2013?) of a Manikin parade in KB.

25:57

She says that they had to wear a uniform/overalls in KB. She thinks that they might have been given one to start off but thinks that they bought their own later on. She can't say whether they were the same colour. She says that you had to be clean and tidy for the job that you were doing.

27:45

When asked how far afield people came to work at KB she says quite a way. "I can remember all these buses outside Hoovers cos there was Hoover opposite of course which quite a few women but mostly men would catch to go up the valley where I lived in Pendarren and all those areas up there and then down the valley to Aberfan, Troed-y-Rhiw, all Treharris and all that way, so there would be buses going up and coming down

the valley and going home time this would be just full of people getting on these buses from all different areas. They came from Tredegar and over that area, and a few other places, yes they would come from quite a way because it was a factory for women."

The buses were laid on for the workforce but they had to pay the bus fare. They could buy a daily or weekly ticket. It was the only way they could get to work so they all used the buses.

29:39

AA says that the wages seemed good at the time. "It was thrilling, exciting really to have a pay packet you know and think I earned that - that was my first pay packet sort of thing. And I couldn't wait to take it home and you know give my nan something cos they'd been good to me and kept me for years and it was nice to give them something back really." When asked if she bought clothes with the money she says yes and no she didn't make her own clothes although a lot of her friends did. If it was lunchtime or break time they could take things in and sew on the machines. She says KB were pretty good like that. She says that she made a few small things but she would buy most of her clothes and pay a little bit weekly for them in a shop in Merthyr. She went in every Friday or Saturday after she had her pay and she had a card and she'd pay a little bit off it. She says they always sold nice quality clothes. She says she got a sheepskin coat from there and still has it upstairs. She says it was Cambrian and made in Wales. She says it was £30+ which was a fortune. She talks about how much she wore the sheepskin coat and a red fox fur hood.

34:39

When asked if they could talk when they were on the machines she says yes, so long as you did your work. The more work they did the more they got paid. She says there was always music playing, coming over the system. She says that they'd all sing to the music. They had supervisors on each line each overlooking so many workers. Then they had the main 4 women, Miss Romy... she had a glass box in the middle of the room, and that's where she stood and looked around. She didn't miss much. But she was very nice and if you had a problem you could go and speak to her. She was the head forewoman there. She says it was a pleasant place to work. When asked does she remember what they sang she says whatever was popular at the time. She says she still listens to the radio all the time. She says she remembers one song "Reet Petite", because her friend Rita worked in the cutting room. They used to go dancing and they play that - Jackie Wilson singing Reet Petite. She says it was all jiving and Rock 'n Roll. She names some other songs - The Platters, Johnny Mathis - they went to see Johnny Mathis when he came to Cardiff, The Everly Brothers - they came to Cardiff. All the big names used to go to the Capitol.

38:33

When asked about the camaraderie and did they all get on, she said yes mostly. She says that they had one man machinist from Troed-y-Rhiw and he sat amongst all the women. He had a big huge machine and did the elasticated waistbands on the slips or panties. That's what he did all day. She says that he took some teasing, but she says he was a great character. They organised some trips to Blackpool. She'd never been to Blackpool and it took a really long time to get there. She thought she was going to the other end of the world. The man organised the trip. They went up the tower and the ballroom. She says she hasn't been to Blackpool since either. As far as she can remember he was the only male machinist and it was very unusual for a man to sit on a machine. She said he was a real character.

40:19

When asked if the girls used to go out together, she said "certain groups - whoever you were friendly with. People wherever they worked because it was quite a big factory - if people were working together they tended to sort of go out with whoever in the evenings. But you'd all see each other when you were out." She says that if you had the money you could go somewhere every night. She says that they tried to go to the pictures once a week and "dancing on a Saturday night was a must." She says that there were quite a few dance halls in Merthyr at the time. One is still going now and is called Coolers. "It was known as the Kirkhouse in them days. We'd try to go once a week." They would only be able to buy soft drinks at the time. There was the Palace which was a cinema and a dance hall after. There was a dance hall in Dowlais - the Catholic Hall - which belonged to the Catholic Church. There was the Miner's Hall in Merthyr which was an old building and it's still there. There were quite a few dances in and around Merthyr. She says there were actual bands playing, not records. When asked if she remembers any of the old bands and what they played, she says that there have been a few photographs in the Merthyr Express. She says they played 'everything'. 'middle of the road' songs that were popular at the time - rock n roll, foxtrot - bit of everything. She says that they got a bit fed up of Merthyr after a while and went to Pontypridd, to the New Inn. She says it was very nice with different bars downstairs and a lovely staircase. There was a dance upstairs on a Saturday. She says that she was the first on the train on a Saturday because all her friends lived in Pentrebach, Troed-y-Rhiw, Merthyr Vale etc. She met her husband at the New Inn. Coming home she'd be the last off. The last bus would have gone and she had to walk home to Pendarren, which didn't bother her at all. She says times were different then. Nobody attacked her and you rarely saw a fight. They'd never heard of drugs when they went out dancing. She talks of how things are today for her grandson etc. She says that she thinks that they had the best times because there was plenty of work around. If you didn't like the job you were doing you could finish and start another one straight away, because there were plenty of factories. "I really think that we had the best times to be honest."

46:43

When asked if she thought they had plenty of freedom as young women, she says

"To a certain extent yes. I think they were strict at home like where I was brought up with my two aunts and there were rules and regulations and you had to be in by a certain time, which was a good thing really.... but you could go out if you could afford it if you had the money you could go." She talks about her parent's generation and how difficult it was for them, and the family and domestic set up.

48:23

She says she remembers when she was living with her aunts they put a gas geyser in to have hot water and she was so excited. And then she says they had the first little single tub washing machine from Hoovers. Her uncle wouldn't let her aunty use it on her own on case she electrocuted herself.

"He was afraid for her to use it. He said 'You can't use that machine unless I'm here.' She said 'Why?' He said 'No Mags! You could blow yourself up with the plug!' so it took two of them, to use this washing machine! It was hysterical... hilarious." Before then she used a scrubbing board and a sink and took washing in for other people.

49:06 "There's be a bowl for the blue to make the whites whiter, starch for the men's collars, there'd be all these different bowls and she'd take in washing to be folded up and put in a bag or a basket and I remember taking it to whoever she was washing for. Now she did that and the cooking."

49:52

When asked if the factory ever arranged social occasions AA says they had interfactory dances between all the factories in Merthyr at the City Hall in Cardiff. Everybody would dress up. They'd go to Cardiff by train unless there was a bus put on. They's also have a Christmas dinner in the canteen which she doesn't think they paid for. If they went out they arranged that themselves or by the department they worked in. They went to a pub in Merthyr for a dinner and dance.

51:44

They had day trips but again that was arranged by themselves. Like the Blackpool trip and people would arrange trips to go different places, like Porthcawl or Barry. When asked about paid holidays she says yes she thinks they had holiday pay depending on how long they'd been there. She thinks they had 2 weeks off during factory fortnight. All the factories had the same 2 weeks off like the collieries - the miner's fortnight - and everybody went to Porthcawl. She thinks KB shut for a fortnight. She thinks they did a lot of maintenance work when they weren't there. She says that they had bank holidays as well. When asked where she used to go on holiday she says she did wonders out of her pay. She and her friends there were about 6-8 of them, they first holiday she remembers going on they went to Italy, and they went by train. They went from Merthyr to London by coach, then got on a train in London and went all the way to Italy by train. She thinks she borrowed the money from her Nan to go and then paid her back every

year. It was a compartment train and they were all excited. They went through France and Germany and when they got into Swizerland "we thought we'd died and gone to heaven. We'd never seen anything so beautiful in all our lives. It was absolutely stunning. It was like something you read in the Heidi book. Then through Swizerland to Italy well we had a ball - you can imagine." She says she was about 17 or 18.

56:35

She talks about her first Italian holiday.

59:36

She says that the second time they went they flew. She talks about her second Italian holiday in the same place and her friends the Sidolis from Merthyr and the other Italian families from Merthyr cafes who had holiday homes back in Italy, where they came from.

63:35

When asked if she clocked in at KB AA says yes. She thinks they started about 9 or about 8.30. Everyone worked the same hours more or less. They had a break in the morning, a break in the afternoon and an hour for lunch. She thinks they finished about 5 or 4.30 and they worked for about 8 hours.

65:02

When asked what the facilities were like she says they were very good. They had nice toilets and a canteen and nice homemade food. There were women working there making food every day. The conditions were good she says. It wasn't an old factory.

"When we went to work in the training room first, we had exercises. There was a lady who took us outside for half an hour and we had exercises you know - keep fit things, for all the girls that started there - the youngsters."

66:27

When asked how things changed when they moved from Pentrebach to Dowlais, she says it was more convenient for her, but for other people from down the valley it was further for them to go. They weren't so happy about it. The KB stockings were always in Dowlais, but the underwear had been in Pentre-bach. They joined the factory in Dowlais and an extension was built for the underwear.

68:18

When asked about the union, she says that there were unions and she was a member - they were all members. When asked if she remembers any strikes she says nothing big

sticks out in her mind. She says that the management and supervisors were ok so long as you did your job. If you didn't they have word with you to do better.

70:15

When asked if they were good employers AA says they were. "It was a big thing for women in Merthyr at that time." She talks about the KB book. When asked if they were happy for women with children to come back and work she says yes. They were very accommodating for people with families but they didn't have any childcare facilities. She says there was a big mix of ages of women working there. People doing all different jobs like packing. She tries to work out the years she worked there and goes quickly through her life history. She says that she eventually finished in 68, 69. She says that she was only part time after her son was born and by the time she'd paid the bus fare and the childcare she said her husband reckoned it wasn't worth it financially. When asked if her husband was happy for her to work she says yes. Eventually she had three sons and after her Aunty Mag died her 'Nan' was lonely, because the two sisters had always lived together. She went to stay with AA and her family for a while but stayed living there. She talks about selling the house in Pendarren and building a granny flat on the back.

78:29

With her Nan living there she decided she wanted to go out and do something as the family was older. When asked if she'd missed working she said yes, that she'd been home for years seeing to the family so she just wanted something a little bit different. So she went to work in Thorns which made lightbulbs. She says she worked the evening shift in Thorns. She's make tea for everybody and then go out to work when her husband came in. When asked what her wages were like in Thorns she says she doesn't remember.

80:30

She says that they made lightbulbs in Thorns "We were downstairs, as you go into the main door there was a downstairs part where there was a conveyor belt - I think we were four or five girls - we were the first operation. You had a chair and you sat down and there was a conveyor belt by the side of you with all holes in. They came then... men usually, put these huge boxes of bulbs on a stand in front of you which were completely empty... and then that was your job then, what we called bulb loading - to pick the bulbs out neck down pick them out of the box - by how many a time you could pick up, and you dropped them in these holes in the belt once the shift started. It was going all the time so you had to keep those holes filled. And then once that box was empty they'd bring another box and you dropped them in neck down. Then they went upstairs then and had all the filaments and insides put inside them."

81:43

When asked how she found that work having been a skilled machinist, she said it got a bit monotonous and boring, but they used to have some fun. She says the money there was quite good for factories. It wasn't piece work like Kayser Bondor. "You could train a donkey to do it actually after a while - it was so easy. But it was the company and the laughs we had and a bit of fun you know and things like that. And the hours suited me in the evenings."

83:50

She says that she knew some of the women there before she went to work there. A lot of people from Heol Gerrig worked there because it was convenient and they could walk to work. She says they were good employers. They were devastated when the factory closed. She says that her husband died in 1981 and he was 43. The boys were young. She went back to work in Thorns eventually but had to work days. She was having a widow's pension and by working days she would have been earning too much money. A part time job suited her better. She talks about the other jobs she did after Thorns.

88:00

She says that she's still in touch with her workmates from Thorns because a lot of the women live in Heol Gerrig and also from Kayser Bondor.

89:22

When asked how she feels about the time she spent working in factories, KB especially she says

"Yes - good. Yes I enjoyed it. It was a pleasant place to work, it was pretty and colourful and clean. So for a girl it was the ideal place. Loads and loads of women worked there.. loads.. and it was a nice place to work. For Merthyr and the valleys.. for women.. it was wonderful really."

91:54

END OF INTERVIEW/DIWEDD Y CYFWELIAD