

ARCHIF MENYWOD CYMRU
WOMEN'S ARCHIVE OF WALES



VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI

Kayser Bondor, Merthyr Tudful

Interviewee: VSE024 Irene Hughes

DOB: 3/2/1933

Date: 25/01/2014

Interviewer: Jayne Sandells on behalf of the Women's Archive of Wales / Archif Menywod Cymru

So if you could just tell us a little bit about your background; where you were born your mum and dad and their occupations if you had any sisters?

I was born up in Plymouth Street. Doesn't exist now because they took our 'ouses down for the road. My mother and father, my father died when I was 10. He's dead 71 years now.

What did he do?

Collier he was at first 'til he had a bump on his arm then he went to work in Lever Brothers up in Dowlais, the soap factory. And he was there then 'til you know 'til he died. He died in 1943. My mother worked as a dinner lady in a canteen. With the children you know with the dinner time that's all she done you know. My mother died in 1983.

You said you had a sister...

Pardon?

You had a sister?

Yes, she was 90 yesterday. She was married for 63 years when her husband died now and I got one niece; Catherine.

01:21

Where did you go to school?

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I went to the 'Draw' (?) when I was younger and then I went to Queens Road Modern Girls School

How old were you when you left school?

16, when I was head girl up there in the school. I was there from when I was 11 until 16. I could have left school at 14 but . . .

How did you feel about leaving school?

Oh I loved school... loved being in school. And my mother thought, Oh she better keep me there. We didn't have much money mind, she was having 5/- a week for me and 10/- for herself and that was it. We had to live on that; 15/- a week.

So you went to work then...

I went to work in Kayser Bonder. March the 6th it was 1949 and I finished on my 51st birthday, they made us redundant.

So how did you get the job? How did you find out about it?

Oh they were coming around schools telling you about it all you know all the time. 'bout the factory open down there and the was a 'osery factory up in Dowlais as well.

Did you want to work at Kayser Bonder or was there somewhere else...?

No I want to go to there, I liked sewing, but I didn't land making the garments there after, I was on the strapping section for 25 years and then I went to work with my friend Mair for 10 years on the lathe, on the cutting table.

02:54

So did you need any qualifications to do the job?

No, I was like in charge of the strapping. No, no qualifications, no. (laughs)

So how did you feel about working there?

Oh, I used to love working there /. Money wasn't very good but I used to like working there. Lot of my friends went to Hoovers, but I stopped there. (laughs)

Were there a lot of people, local people working in Kayser Bonder?

Oh yes, loads of us yeah.

So, can you remember your first day at work?

Yes I can.

What do you remember about it?

Yes, going into the training school. They um, what do they call 'em... Welfare Officer taking us up to the training school and introducing us to the supervisors, you know. We were on

machines then, running straight lines. After a few weeks they put you on another machine. But I went out on the strapping bench to work and I never came back in there. (laughs) I was there 25 years.

So how many other women worked there? Was it a big workforce?

Oh yes, a few hundred, a good few hundred there. Sure to be 500 or more. I'm not very good at figures but sure to be 500 or more, there was two rooms there. Two sections, yeah.

Did any men work in the factory?

Yes, they used to do the cutting and the cleaners were men there you know and we had to 'ave the mechanics and electricians; they were all men.

04:40

So you had some training, so what did the training entail? You said you went to the training school...

It was teaching you how to make the garments up and things you know then in the training school but I went out on the strapping section making... We used to make the straps then, feed 'em through these machines and um then. I 'ad two machines working there and I had a chair, the mechanics made a chair with a rail and I used to ride/run between the two machines. I kick the one on, they made wooden things on the treadle so that they would run on their own you know. I used to go back and for all the time feeding them. And we 'ad a, a box in front of us with a razor blade in it cutting the length of the straps that was required. Then they'll go to the bucklers then and they go out then on to the garments you know. Then after that they done away with all that and we had ribbon straps. It was just my friend and myself then we were doing the work for all the factory, but I used to take work home every night. I used to work 'til twelve o'clock in the night. Ah what was I going to say, I got my first docket by there.

We'll have a look at that later if you like...

Oh yes, I got my first docket by there and um I used to have my mother putting the links on and I'd finish 'em off. She couldn't do that bit. But that was every night. We had to buckle to 12 pairs of err straps like to two dozen straps for 2 ½ d in those days. And if we took 'em 'ome they gave us 7 ½ d, trebled it up. It was Chinese labour (laughs) but we used to do it to earn the money.

Were there married women working in the factory?

Oh yes, yes, lots of married women there.

So did they do the same jobs then as the unmarried women?

Yes.

So was there any sort of childcare?

Nothing, no nothing there like that.

Do you know how much the other workers were paid?

They didn't used to 'ave a lot but they used to earn more than us I think. There was one group in there that made sure they 'ad the best work and they earned the money. (laughs)

And what were they doing?

Making the garments, yeah, making garments up.

So, can I ask you what you did with your pay when you had it? You said it wasn't very much but...

I gave it to my mother 'til the day she died.

So you had to share you wages with all your family...

It was only my mother it was. Whatever I earned, I gave to her.

07:25

Were there any perks? Were you able to have any of the garments or anything?

Ooh yeah they 'ad a shop there and they'd allow us so many slips, NQPs they called 'em; 'not quite perfect' and we'd have stockings from the stocking factory, 'bout once a year, oh thick silk ones, you know, old fashioned then, no tights in those days. Yes, we could buy things in the shop. And sometimes they'd sell material which we thought was wonderful. What they finished with, you know, redundant, they'd sell it off then. Yes.

So were there any trade unions in the factory?

Oh yes, yes, we were in the union.

Which union was it?

Tailor and Garment Workers Union.

And you had to pay a subscription to that?

Yes, we had to pay to that. I forget how much that was, about 3d a week I think, something like that.

So was there any trouble at the factory that at any time the Union had to get involved in?

Oh we did go on strike once or twice. That was when we was up Dowlais, we didn't strike in Pentrebach but up Dowlais, yes.

What was the cause of the strike?

Oh for the wages, (laughs) over the wages. Um, we used to go up early in the morning. Mair and myself and Mair's 'usband 'ad to get out of bed to take us up we'd be round a big fire then, poking it.

Outside the factory?

Outside the factory. We'd be black coming home from the smoke and we be there hours up there and they'd be all fetching bacon and things (laughs) cooking them on this fire. We did

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have a bit of fun and then they said you can go down an' um to the employment place somewhere in town and we'd go down Mair and I to help our money to help us. I had 1/8 and I don't think Mair had anything because she had a husband (laughs) 1/8 I had anyway after going all the way to this office up town; 1/8.

So was the dispute resolved?

Yes

Did you have a pay rise?

We didn't have much of one, but you know..

But you did get one?

We did get one. I can't remember what it was

As a worker you felt you were treated reasonably fairly?

Yes, we were alright, yes.

How did you get on with the supervisors and managers?

Marvellous, great.

Did you have to wear a uniform at all?

Overall, yeah.

Can you describe it?

Pink it was. Pink overall with grey collar and cuffs on these overalls. They had them made for us and we all had overalls each then.

So they were provided for you?

Yes, they give us the overalls.

10:19

Was it dangerous to work on the machines?

Well I landed in hospital once (laughs) I had (coughs) my finger in the strapping machine, twin needles and my finger went under and the needles went through my hand but I had them out as I thought but they sent me for x-ray they were in my hand for weeks and then I had to go into the infirmary it was then St Tydfil's Hospital for operation to get the needles out so I was out of work for a few weeks 'cos I had all stitches in my hand.

So were you paid while you were off sick?

On the insurance see and then I was making bows with the strapping. Bows for the petticoats and the nighties and that was a 'lectric saw machine and my thumb went under there and I cut the top of my thumb off so I was out for weeks with that they clip stitched it back on but I did have £200 compensation. They had the Inspector up there to inspect it and e said it wasn't safe so I had £200 months after, but I had it.

Were there any other injuries? Did other people suffer injuries?

I remember one girl working with us; her hair caught in the belt on the machine and pulled it out. Oh she was bald, it never grew back. Mair her name was. Nor my friend Mair down there, another Mair. But that was nasty that was, when she had this long hair dangling, you know, and it went round the wheel, I can see it now.

So what about Health & Safety were there any rules and regulations?

I don't know what health and safety they had there I dunno. We had a nurse mind, you know, she was there all day long a nurse if you went to her.

You said a nurse, were there any other facilities there? Did you have a canteen or rest room?

Oh yes , canteen yes and um you could buy dinners then there 1/3d the dinners were. I can remember that, 1/3d the dinners in the canteen. We used to have an hour for dinner and 2 breaks of ¼ hour; one in the morning, one in the afternoon. Oh and they played the same music every day over this thing I can see it now; Itsy, Bitsy, Teeny, Weeny, Yellow Dot Bikini and I was sitting under a big notice oh and I kept staring at that every day and it's still in my 'ead:

'Output is the main key to prosperity.' Sir Stafford Cripps, I could have ripped it off the wall! (laughs) I was sitting staring at it all the time, all those years.

Was it very noisy?

Yeah, mm. Terrible noisy. I got Tinnitus, I don't know if it's from that but it was noisy all the machines were going see.

So you couldn't chat to the other girls?

Oh you'd have to shout we used to have a little... oh it was a terrible din in there. Terrible noisy.

What about smoking? Were you allowed to smoke in the factory?

I've never smoked but all the others in the toilet. (laughs) They used to go out the toilet to smoke but I'm not a smoker.

So do you think you've suffered any long term effects, you've already said about the tinnitus?

Yes, must be from that, I don't know what it's from. Well I did go I yes I been to a few consultants and they said that my hearing is affected to go and try for this money they had for the deafness, you know, but it was no good Courtaulds had gone from here see, didn't bother.

14:15

What about the men? How did the ladies treat the men in the factory?

Oh alright they used to have a good laugh with them, quarrel with them sometimes mind.

So what did you quarrel about?

Oh 'cos they wouldn't pull their weight. (laughs) Specially in the cutting ta room when I went with Mair. They used to earn the money and Mair and I were the donkeys lifting all the heavy rolls and running up and down laying them and they only used to go round on the band knife. They were well away; we weren't though. I think that's...

Were there young men there or just older men?

When I started there first there were a bunch of boys they had to come and learn to sew on the machine with us coming out of the army. Oh, we used to laugh at them, don't talk! I don't know what shape they used to sew (laughs) and they had to come there and they had a line full of boys about 8 they'd come out from the army and they had to work on sewing machines mun. They didn't like it and after that it was just like the cutters and the bulk boys as we used to call them. Our one bulk boy that we used to play the bear with he turned out to be the mayor of Merthyr. (laughs) and he started...

What was his name?

Raymond Thomas, he started when he came from school. Oh I still bother with Raymond now and talk to him..

Did you have holidays?

Yes, fortnight in the summer and like the usual for Christmas and Easter and Whitsun. Two days.

The same fortnight?

Yeah, factory fortnight we used to call it all the factories were shut there was loads around here then.

So did the factory run a shift system?

No not in Kay... Oh yes they did have part-time people in the night. I'd cut all the straps ready for them and they'd do them for the night they'd work in the night, about 4 hours a night they were. They were all married women they were working.

So did you have to...

Part-time

Did you have to 'clock in' and 'clock out'?

Yes. Mmm. Yes, we had to do that.

So you said about the canteen, what were the meals like there?

Well they wasn't too bad, you know. They used to do they best in'it. Toast we used to buy (laughs) or take our own. When we started there I was living on the main road then the bus fare was 1d up and 1d down then we bought bikes and we used to go to work on our bikes then and chain them up. We used to be racing like a fool but there wasn't much traffic on the

road then see. You'd never go on a bike today but we used to then go there on a bike; a gang of us.

So were you allowed days off for personal reasons if there was a...?

Yes, they'd give you hour or two off.

What sort of reasons did people take time off?

Well if they had to go for an appointment, or to the doctors or something you know. Oh and they had a doctor regular there checking you to see that you was alright.

17:41

So you got to work by bike or did walk you said was it?

We went on the bike and we went on the bus. But Dowlais I had to go on the bus all the time up to Dowlais but Pentrebach wasn't so bad it's only down the road by there.

So how was the furthest you went?

Where now? On the bike?

Or the bus yes...

Where, to work you mean or...

Yes, to work.

Well we had to go from Plymouth St we'd catch the bus it'll be coming up, picking the girls up in the valley, you know, coming up to Kayser Bonder. Then we'd go straight up to the Kayser Bonder in Dowlais then on it.

Was that the service bus or was that a special bus?

Yes, service bus.

So it wasn't a special bus.

Corporation buses they were then. We used to catch them every morning up and down.

So what time did you leave for work in the morning? What time did you have to catch the bus?

Um, what time did we used to ... about half past seven we used to leave for Dowlais and we used to work 8 hours a day down in Pentrebach for months for £1 15s a week, 40 hours a week. I don't know how that works out I dunno.

So what time did you finish in the afternoons?

Five o'clock. Five o'clock til 8 o'clock in both places. They used to leave us 'ome early on a Friday. That was years after up in Dowlais it wan down in Pentrebach. We used to finish early on a Friday.

So did you ever work Saturdays or Sundays ever?

Oh I did, yes. I used to work every day overtime, I said I put years in working overtime without the 35.

So, did you get paid extra for working on Saturdays and Sundays? Was it a higher rate?

On.., If we worked in work I wouldn't 'ave nothing extra for the 'ouse but that was just the ordinary rate, you know. But yes, if it was in work you would 'ave it. Double time or something they used to call it.

Were there any social activities organised for the workers in the factory?

They used to have a netball, not netball hockey and football for the boys and it was a pitch like a ploughed field. You couldn't run on it you'd be fallin' over. I went a few times but give it up after. And they used to do lovely concerts on a Christmas. I was never in them mind. But, um the managers, you know, they would take part and the girls. They used to be lovely the concerts there on a Christmas time. And they'd give us a Christmas dinner, didn't pay for that.

20:23

Was there a factory trip?

Oh yes, well I was in the 10 year club and I was in the 21 year club where they took us... um on the 10 year club mostly we went to Cardiff and 'ad a meal and then they take us to the New Theatre for a show. An then later on we started going on trips to Weston. We'd 'ave the day free there but we used to go to a show ourselves on the pier, you know. Where in the 21 club... yeah Ooo, and I 'ad a gold watch. When you were in the 21 club they gave you 21 guineas an you 'ad to go an buy somethin'. So I bought a Rotary gold watch in Samuels, I still got it. (laughs) It's upstairs somewhere. Nice gold watch at the time. But that's all I ever 'ad off 'em. Nothing else. Oh and I think I 'did 'ave a nightie and a negligée for not missing work for so long or somthin' that's what they gave us. Fiesta they were called, they're upstairs somewhere. I did 'ave that off 'em for nothing.

So you enjoyed working at the factory?

Yes, I loved working there?

So why did you enjoy it so much?

Oh they used to 'ave a laugh. Some days we'd 'ave the ab dabs but mostly it was alright. You knew everybody there. Not many of us left now but we keep in touch. Send birthday cards and Christmas cards but we're going fewer and fewer now.

Do you have a reunion?

Yes, we've 'ad a reunion, yes. That was good and they all dressed up. We all 'ad our photos taken but I don' know where they are now. We 'ad our photos in the Cricket Club in Pentrebach and they 'ad all the slips up an big banners an they 'ad us who'd been there for years up on the stage. It was a good night that was. Lovely night.

So what was the reason you left?

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Redundant. On my 51st birthday. Made redundant.

How did you feel about being made redundant?

Aw, I was worrin' because I used to look after my mother cos she wasn't well and then she just passed away in the November and they made us redundant and I was on my own then.. so... I loved working there.

It sounds like you enjoyed it very much.

Pardon?

It sounds like you enjoyed it very much

Yeah, Yeah, I did enjoy it there, yeah

Is there anything else that you remember that you would like to share?

No I can't remember anything else. (Pause) Can't think of anything. I bet my voice'll be terrible on there now.

That's fine. Thanks very much.

Oh it's alright. I've got some things if you want to see 'em.

Yeah, I'll take a photograph of them and then I think Catrin is going to come and...

Oh that's my first docket that is...

23:39

END OF INTERVIEW/DIWEDD CYFWELIAD