

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

**Steinberg's Alexon House, Pontypridd**

**Interviewee:** VSE027 Barbara Irene Morgan,  
**DOB:** 12/10/1932  
**Date:** 05/02/2014  
**Interviewer:** Catrin Edwards on behalf of the Women's  
Archive of Wales / Archif Menywod Cymru

BM says that she wasn't born in this house but in her grandmother's house in Ilton Terrace but came to live here when she was 3 and a half, when her mother bought the house.

00:52

BM says her father was a miner and worked in Taff Merthyr Colliery. Her mother was a housewife, but during the war she worked in Bridgend Munitions Works. She had the job of painting the ring around the bombs. She then worked as a cook in the 'skin' hospital in Bedlinog. She says her father was old fashioned and he was in the army at the time. He wasn't willing for BM's mother to work. When he came out of the army she had to stop working.

02:05

BM says she has a sister and a brother who died last year. She also lives in Bedlinog. BR says that she had an ordinary elementary education. She says that she went to the girls' school and that the schools weren't mixed in those days. She says that there were 4 schools in the village, 2 infants schools, a girls' schools and a boys' school. Now there's only one. She says that if you passed your 11+ the girls went to Hengoed county school or Bargoed technical college. (But then she isn't quite sure.)

03:43

BM says that she left school at 14. She the war had just ended and that all of her age group left school at 14. When asked how she felt about leaving school at that age, she says that she didn't try the 'elementary exam' which meant that she could go to Grammar school. She says a lot of the parents in the village paid for their children to go to Bloggs secretarial college in Cardiff. her father wanted to pay for her to go but she didn't want that. However she felt that her parents couldn't afford it and that the money could be better spent elsewhere. She stayed at home for a year with her mother because she was unwell and kept house and cook for the family. She says that all girls of her age group knew how to do that.

05:44

BM says that when she was 15 she met a friend from the village who had a job as a housemaid in a school, but her friends who were supposed to go with her had let her down. BM and her friend said that they would go with her to work at the school. Her mother was unwilling for her to go but her father was willing for her to go and 'try it'. So three of them went to work in Cheltenham College for boys. She talks about the work at Cheltenham where she worked for 18 months and then she came home and after another period at home helping her mother she went to the factory to work.

07:09

BM says she was about 17 when she went to work in the factory and she went to Steinberg's in Hawthorn, just outside Pontypridd. She says it was a clothing factory. They made skirts and Alexon models. She says that although it was Steinbergs all their skirts and coats were Alexon models.

08:19

BM says that they had to have an interview, a medical and an eye test for the job in the factory. They asked her if she'd done any sewing and she said that she could use a hand sewing machine. The machines were all electric, but she managed it. She says that there was a section that was a training section. The first thing she did was to put zips in skirts. The she was putting hessian between the pockets and the silk in the pockets of coats. She also put Basques in costume jackets. The work was examined and if it was rejected you had it back and you had to unpick and do it again. "If you were on a section where the girls were pretty good and you wasn't, it piled up but they were very good - they would take some of your work and help you because you would earn money. The more you did, the more money you had you see for each section."

09:45

When asked how long the training lasted BM says "Oh not long. If you didn't have it under your fingertips in a month, you'd know you wasn't any good."

09:58

When asked to describe what the first day at the factory was like BM says "Oh my god - well you can imagine a huge building with all these machines of all different sorts and the noise - zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz... buzzing, and I thought 'Oh my God..' and I knew then that I wasn't going to stay there. I didn't like it. And I mean I used to look out the window and think 'How long have I been here... stuck in this place, closed up?'" And when we used to have a lunchtime then I used to go for a walk around the grounds."

10:36

When asked what her wages were when she went to work there, BM said they were pretty good. In the beginning it wasn't a lot because they were training - it was about £2/10/- then. She says she had to pay her season ticket so she was bringing about £2 home. But when they were on the section they could earn as much as £5 if you were fast enough and the end produce were passed. This was for piece work. She says you had to work for it, it was head down and on the go all the time.

11:26

When asked when they started work in the morning, she says that they left home at 6.30 am. They caught a special bus and picked up workers on the way. They got to work at about 8.30 am to get ready for work and be at the machine at 9 am. She doesn't know who ran the special bus - it wasn't run by the factory, they had to pay a fare and they all had season tickets. She thinks the ticket was about 10/- a week.

12:04

When asked what else she spent her money on, BM says she wasn't a smoker so it was clothes mostly because she's always loved clothes and shoes. She used to give her mother 10/- and she used to save some of it. She says she's good at saving. She says she also used to love to go walking. She used to go to dances which were unlicensed. They didn't drink, they just went for the joy of dancing. She used to treat her brother and sister to things since she was the eldest.

13:06

When asked if earning £5 a week felt like 'good money' BM says that yes it was for a woman. The average wage for a girl then was about £2 - £2/10/-. They only paid £2/10/- for shop work. She says that they had a break at 11am for 10 mins. She doesn't think that they had an hour for lunch, but she thinks it was 45 mins. Then they worked until 5 pm. She says that they clocked in and had to be at their machine at 9 am. She says that they didn't get in until 6.30 in the evening. So it was 6.30 in the morning until 6.30 in the evening when the bus would drop them off at the end of the road. She agrees that it was a very long day.

14:24

She says that they didn't have a uniform.

"The girls used to dress very smartly you know - to go to work. I don't know whether they used to try to outdo each other or what! Their hair was always done nice, and made up nicely - I can't say there were any scruffy people there - they were all very well turned out."

When asked if she used to make her own clothes, BM says not at the time, but her mother used to do a bit of sewing. She says they didn't have a lot of clothes then after the war. They were still on coupons. She says that they had their best clothes and they had what they called their evening clothes, and they had their working clothes. It wasn't a lot of clothes but they were good quality. They were pure wool or pure cotton.

"You never had more than two good cotton dresses, a good pair of sandals for the summer and your accessories, but we didn't have an awful lot of clothes, because we just couldn't afford them and we didn't have the coupons to get them."

15:37

When asked about the facilities in the factory BM said they were pretty good. She says there was a nice canteen if you wanted to use it but she always took her own food cos it was cheaper. She says her mother always gave them a nice box of food to take to work. They'd buy their tea or coffee there. The toilet facilities were very good and quite clean. She doesn't remember if the smokers were allowed to smoke in the factory but she doesn't think they were because of the potential cigarette burns on the material. She thinks they went to the toilet and had a quick puff.

16:41

BM says that they had to keep their own machines clean - clean them, oil them, clean the tops so there was no dust. When asked if it was a clean factory, BM says yes and they had someone coming around and sweeping up the cottons and fluff all the time. There was a lot of fluff in the material then. She says there wasn't a lot of synthetic material. It was all wool and cotton. When asked if the clothes were high end, BM says yes they were.

"They were sold to John Lewis' and you know all the big shops - David Morgan's in Cardiff - they used to send samples out to these places and then they would order so many of them."

She doesn't remember the buyers coming round. She says that they would have gone to the offices and not to the factory floor.

17:54

When asked how many of them worked at the factory, BM says she couldn't say, but there were a lot of them - men and women. She thinks there were about the same amount of women and men. The men serviced the machines, there were the mechanics and there were men who did the cutting of the cloth as well. When asked if any women did cutting jobs BM says that if they were good at it they did. When asked if all the machinists were women she says that she thinks there were men as well on the big heavy machines but she wasn't sure what they did.

19:00

When asked if the factory was unionised, BM says yes she thinks there was a union there, but she doesn't remember joining it, but she thinks she must have. She doesn't remember any disputes. She thinks that because there was a lot of work about.

"You could walk out of one factory on the Treforest Trading Estate and have a job in the afternoon in another factory. Because all the work was for export. I knew girls who worked in the chocolate... butter candies they used to call it - making chocolates and things like that and .. a lot of our stuff was for export then, cos Europe was devastated as you know after the war."

20:06

When asked about the relationship between the managers, owners and workers BM says she says that Mr Rose, who was Jewish, came around the factory once and was a bit appalled by the state of the machines. He said "Clean your confounded machines!" over the tannoy. But on the whole she thinks they were pretty good people to work for. They had a nurse and a sick bay if anyone was ill, and she thinks there was a dental place there as well. Luckily she never had cause to use these facilities.

21:10

When asked about the conditions, MB says she thinks the heat had to be fairly constant because of the clothes. She can't remember being cold there at all. The lighting was 'marvellous, wonderful lighting.' They had big lamps over the machines and they were able to see everything, you didn't have to strain to see. She thinks they were good employees and she had no complaints about that. It's just that she didn't like being shut in for all those hours.

22:06

When asked what she didn't like about the work she says that she didn't mind the sewing, but she hated being shut in for so long. She says that if she could have got up and wandered about and then gone back and done some work it would have suited her but she didn't like being shut in. She doesn't like being shut in now. Every door in the house is open. It's very rare that she's travelled on the underground. She says she hates the feeling of being shut in and probably it was that.

22:44

When asked about the other women, BM says that they worked there until they got married and after they were married. They didn't mind it at all. She says the Bedlinog women worked there but when Kayser Bondor, the factory that made lovely lingerie opened in Merthyr, later on, a lot her friends went to work there. A lot of the Merthyr women worked there. She says that she knew a lot of people at the factory when she went to work there - a lot of girls from the village worked there. There was a camaraderie because they all knew each other on the bus and knew some of the boys who worked there as well. She says that they got dropped off and then their bus went on to Trefforest Trading estate. A lot of boys from the village worked on the trading estate - they worked in the Rizla cigarette paper factory, and in KLG where they made sparking plugs for cars. They made components for cars and she knew a lot of people who worked there.

24:18

When asked if she went out with other women from the factory she says that she wasn't a very sociable sort of person and she still isn't - she doesn't mix a lot. She says that she had a lot of friends but she didn't go to the same places as they did. She says that she had a different social life. She liked walking and the countryside and things like that. When asked about Christmas parties, she said that she 'wasn't there long enough to get involved with any of that.' But they did used to have Christmas parties and they had a factory outing and she went on one once.

25:31

BM says that she and her friend went to KLG once for a job. When they entered the factory they placed their scarves over their noses - she says doesn't know what the smell was. But she says that quite a few of the girls who worked there died of cancer. KLG were making sparking plugs for cars and there was asbestos in them. She says the factory's gone now. She says quite a few of the girls were there until they got married, but she says that 2 of her friends had cancer and she often wonders whether it was from working there. She says that they didn't pursue it but was in her mind although there was no proof. She says again the factory's gone and they (her friends) are gone, so there's no comeback.

26:38

When asked if there were any accidents where she was she says:-

"You wasn't a machinist unless you had a needle through your finger. (She laughs) You weren't fully fledged - but I never did, I was too careful. I never had an accident."

CE: "I think you the first person I've spoken to in the Rag Trade that hasn't had a needle through her finger..."

BM: "A lot of the girls used to have a needle - oh god!.... They'd be up in the sick bay, having it... they didn't have it stitched because it went cleanly through, but plastered up you know. No - I never had an accident."

27:15

When asked if she was aware of any other accidents at the factory she says no, she wasn't there long enough. When asked if she was there long enough to have a holiday, she says no. Bu when asked about holiday pay she says yes they did pay holiday pay, she knows that from the friends. And she knows they all used to have a day out. She thinks she went on one but can't remember.

27:56

She says that from the time she was there, she can't remember being 'put on' or that anyone was unkind. She says sewing the zips were difficult because they had to sew right on the edge of the zip, with a piece over the zip and it had to be perfect - she says he woman who taught them to do the zips 'was quite nice. I can't remember her being cross or belittling any one in anyway.... I liked her."

When asked if it was a working experience that she could use in other aspects of her life later on, she says yes, that she used to sew for her daughter and make things for her.

"I made quite a few dresses for myself in the 60s. Dressmaking was 'in' then, you know, you could buy the dress patterns and do them up."

29:33

When asked if they were allowed to talk while they worked, BM says "Yes - you were allowed to talk, but I mean you didn't have the time if you had to keep up. And if you didn't keep... the other girls would be you know miserable cos you was holding them up with what you was doing so they couldn't earn the money they wanted to earn."

29:42

BM says "There was music playing all day over the tannoy you know, all sorts of music and the girls used to sing along with it - there was no restrictions in that." When asked if that was something she enjoyed she said yes that she'd always liked singing. She was in Merthr Tydfil Ladies' Choir for over 20 years. She hasn't long finished with them, because she says that she can't stand now during the concerts. When asked if she remembered any of the songs, she says they were the popular songs of the day, not any other music. This was the 1950s and she says she knows lots of songs from then but can't bring one to mind now.

30:48

When asked about the relationship between the women and the men at the factory, she says that she never came in contact much with the men, but they seemed to be quite nice people. When asked about any harassment, she says no, not that she knew of. She says there might have been but she was unaware of it. She says she was single while she was there and she worked there for about three months, give or take a week or two. When asked why she left she says:-

"I just said to my mother, 'Oh mam, I can't...'. My father said 'Leave it there.' He was like that... if you didn't like something he'd say it would make you ill. 'Leave it there - come home.' She says she was home for a while and one evening she and a friend were sitting at her home, looking through the Western Mail. They saw an advert in the paper for Malvern Girls' College - 'two young girls needed'. She says that they answered the advertisement and they got the job. She said that they applied in December and they went away in January. She says that she stayed in Malvern College for 4 years and that she liked it.

33:04

She talks about Malvern College and the work that she did. She worked as a member of the domestic staff looking after the house for the girls and the college. They lived in and she loved it there. She looked the matron and Miss Walker and says that they were very nice and good people to work for. It was strict and they had to be in at 10 which suited BM's parents 'down to the ground', because 'girls leaving home then, oh it wasn't heard of." They had access to the library and there was a piano there, and you were allowed to play when the girls weren't there. They were also allowed to use the telephone. She says that she met her husband Trev there because there was a big army camp on Malvern Common, and he was in the army. 35:26 She talks about her courtship with Trev.

36:06

She says she didn't work in a factory ever again. She says that's she's worked in many different places - but never in a factory She worked in John Lewis', manicurist/receptionist at a hairdresser, and working in a school, - playground duty, teacher's aid, etc and she says she loved that, and managing a boutique in Nelson. She says that was her last job.

37:40

When asked how she feels about the time she spent working in a factory, she says:-

"I think it was a learning curve, you know. Every job you do is a learning curve, and although I didn't like it I think I did learn something out of it, you know - how to finish garments and things like that, and have them as perfect as you could have them... but I never did any factory work after that. When asked if she got to know herself a bit better, she says:-



Well - you got your independence you know, you felt that you weren't... because... our parents.. we were all in the same boat, all miners children, I never felt poor because I had good mother and my father always worked, and she was a very good cook, she was a good gardener, and she could sew, and she could embroider, she could knit - well of course, all that ribbed off on us then. So although we didn't have a lot of money, I never felt poor, because we did have a good mother and father then - put it that way." She elaborates on her parents.

39:30

When asked about the positives of working in a factory, MB says:- "I was earning my own money, so that gave me independence - I didn't feel so dependent on my parents, and it gave me a little bit of money to buy my sister and my brother, and mother and father little things, and I think you do grow up more. You feel more adult then.. put it that way, although we wasn't adult cos your parents still had their hold on you - 21 you see before we could do anything. We had to have our parent's permission before we were 21.... not 18 like it is now." She talks about the age of consent.

40:29

END OF INTERVIEW/DIWEDD CYFWELIAD