

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI

Kayser Bondor, Pentrebach, Merthyr Tudful

Interviewee: VSE030 Maureen Williams

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

Maureen is an only child who was born and brought up in Merthyr Tydfil. She has continued to live there all her life. Her father served in the air force during the war. During part of that time the family lived in the Dowlais area but then moved first to Twynrodyn and then to 'The Walk' area which is near the Catholic Church. After she married in 1962, Maureen moved to her current address where she lives with her husband.

As a child Maureen attended Twynrodyn primary school. After passing the 11+ exam she went to Merthyr County Grammar School where she stayed until she was 15. Maureen said that she should have stayed on at Merthyr County Grammar School to complete her Central Welsh Board or CWB qualification but instead transferred to Pentrebach Technical College where she undertook a commercial course in shorthand, typing and book-keeping.

After leaving college at 16 -16 ½ Maureen's first job was in the office of a local coal merchant. The coal yard occupied a site where the Merthyr Tydfil railway station now stands. Maureen remembers the office as being a small cabin-type where she and the owner of the company worked, occasionally being helped by the owner's married sister. The company employed a number of people who delivered the coal. The company also supplied building materials such as shale.

As she was the only full time employee Maureen's tasks were many and varied. She managed the accounts; charged people and dealt with the money and banking. In dealing with wages for the delivery men Maureen learned how to calculate Pay As

You Earn (PAYE) and deal with all sorts of tax issues. During her employment at the coal merchants she gained a wide experience of many aspects of office work.

When Maureen was 17 she applied to a few factories for an office job and was successful in finding employment in the wages department of Kayser Bondor at Pentrebach. One of the motivations for her to move jobs was her working conditions at the coal merchants. Maureen commented:

‘...with being a cabin, in the winter, it was cold... it was not really a comfortable thing and I was on my own really I didn’t really have any young company.’

In her new post Maureen had to train as a comptometer operator. She explained that a comptometer was a machine that was used before modern-day calculators. The machine was about 18” x 12” x 9” which had all the digits on it. The operator had to hold down the digits and press it to enable the machine to make the calculation which was displayed on a screen. The machines were decimal even though wages at the time were in Pounds, Shillings and Pence (£SD). All calculations done in the wages office were done on calculators.

The pay records detailing each employees work would be brought up to the wages office from the factory floor. The girls were paid ‘piece work’ and ‘time work’ and Maureen as a wages clerk would use the comptometer to calculate the wages. Details of employees’ wages were kept on cards: pay code, amount earned, PAYE, insurance etc. would be entered manually on a basic *Kalamazoo* System. At that time Kayser Bondor employed around 1,000 people and each wages clerk was responsible for maintaining around 200 employee records per week. They would calculate the gross pay from the work cards, work out the free pay, tax and insurance payments from a book of tables to arrive at the nett pay figure. The top line of the calculations on the *Kalamazoo System* could be torn out to put in the pay packets as a pay slip. There would be a number of *Kalamazoo* sheets which would have about 40 records on each one, all of which had to be balanced both across and down the columns. The pay packets were made up and issued at the end of each week.

Maureen enjoyed working at the factory. She commented that, ‘It was a nice factory, pleasant surroundings... It was quite a large office; you had the wages section then you had the accounts section and then at the end you had an individual office which was for the accountant.’

Altogether Maureen worked at Kayser Bondor for 9 years. The first 4-5 years she spent in the wages section however, she felt that the work was quite monotonous after that time she transferred to the accounts section where she eventually became a supervisor.

The work in the accounts section was more varied and Maureen became experienced in book-keeping. She was involved with costings for the garments, keeping purchase and sales records as well as dealing with manufacturers and suppliers. Her accountancy skills enabled her to take the accounts to trial balance level.

Kayser Bondor eventually downsized, closed the factory at Pentrebach and moved production up to Dowlais where the hosiery had always been. Maureen felt that it was still a nice factory but not as big as when it was at Pentebach. She was only there for 1 year to 18 months before she became pregnant.

Her first wages from the Coal Merchants was £2/15/00 per week which her mother allowed her to keep. Maureen remembers spending it on clothes but she says that she was always one to save so after that she made sure she saved some of her wages in future. She was keen to point out that she had passed this philosophy on to her own children. Maureen felt that she must have had quite an increase in her wages when she moved to Kayser Bondor; they were around £4 per week. Her wages were paid exactly like the other employees but were calculated differently. Unlike the production line workers on 'payroll', staff wages were calculated by only one person so that no-one really knew what anyone else was being paid she said 'it was very secret as to what the wages were'.

Maureen remembers that whilst working for Kayser Bondor employees could buy the garments from a shop on site. As well as being able to buy 'perfect' items it was also possible to buy NQPs (not quite perfect) items and spoilages at 'ridiculous prices'. These items would have been rejected by the examiners. Garments would only have to have a small flaw; the stitching was out or something not quite right then they would be labelled as 'NQP'. A garment with a major flaw would be labelled as 'spoilage' and could be bought for as little as 2/6d.

Maureen describes the 'perfect' garments as 'fantastic lingerie... stuff you saw on the films... the fabrics, laces and you'd have the nightgowns with the peignoirs to go with them. They'd have fantastic sleeves with embroideries and everything... they really were beautiful underwear...' Maureen said that in the 1950s she had lots of the many layered petticoats with stiff netting and hoops that came just above the knee made by Kayser Bondor. She wore the petticoats underneath the bouffant skirts which were fashionable at the time.

The shop accounts were also calculated in the accounts office and were also part of Maureen's duties. The shop assistant would bring all the money and paperwork to the accounts section to be balanced and banked. The girls in the accounts office had a lot to do with the girls making the garments. As the factory girls were on piece work, each morning their 'tickets' needed to be collected so that their wages could be calculated. When a worker completed a batch of 50 or 20 items there would be a

ticket on them. The tickets started at the cutting edge. The huge cutting tables were machines that cut the fabric. The fabric would be marked out and each section labelled with a ticket before being cut. Each piece would have a separate ticket. The fabric would begin as a large square with lots of tickets and as the fabric was cut into sections and processed the tickets were removed. A girl working on a particular item would remove the ticket from each piece and give them to the supervisor to be totalled up and written on their personal record card so that the wages could be calculated accordingly. In this way their 'piece work' could be calculated. Each job would have a different cost for example; sewing a straight seam would be priced differently to sewing, for example, a gusset. Sewing black garments was paid at a premium as it was considered much more difficult.

When asked about trade unions in the factory, Maureen doesn't remember if she was in a union but recalls that there was only one. The office workers didn't join but the factory girls did. Their membership fees were calculated and taken out of their wages by the wages clerks who process the payments to the particular union. The clerks received a small payment as bonus from the unions every 3 months for this part of their job.

In response to a question about staff facilities at the factory, Maureen describes the canteen as being 'very nice' but split into two sections; one big area and a smaller one for the use of the supervisors only. Toilet facilities were separate too. She remembers that all the employees would go to the canteen for breaks. During the morning break there would be toast with coffee and tea. Everyone was friendly with each other. As there were no machines they had to wait for the tea and toast; nothing was self-service and the canteen staff served the workers, both factory and office, who would then pay for what they had.

With regard to annual holidays, Maureen explains that they had paid holidays; 'Factory Fortnight' which was the last week of July and the first week of August when all other factories would be closed. She remembers that the only other Bank Holidays were Christmas Day, Boxing Day and New Year's Day. There were no extra days as such. She recalls that when she was working in the wages office the staff had to work some holidays as the wages could not be completed if they didn't go in. Pay day was always a Friday and Maureen remembers that it was quite usual to work until 8pm on Thursday evenings, particularly if it was a short week due to a Bank Holiday, so that the wages would be ready for pay day on the Friday. The wage packets were individually made up on a Friday morning and then given to the workers as they left the factory at 4pm. There were no real security measures and cash for the wages would be collected from the local bank by the accountant and another male member of staff and brought back for the clerks to count and divide into each pay packet.

Maureen explained that Kayser Bondor didn't have a regular social club but they did arrange a Christmas dance as well organising for its workforce to go to the Inter-factory Dance held at the Civic Hall in Cardiff. This dance was also attended by all the local factories and held usually at the end of March. There were inter-factory sports events too but no organised leisure trips away from the factory.

Going back to when she worked in the wages section, Maureen recalls that there were about 8 women in the office with the only men being the accountant and Ken, who used to do the staff wages. Downstairs in the production or 'ticketograph' office there were a couple more men but the majority of the staff were women. The 'ticketograph' office was responsible for printing the previously mentioned tickets that were attached to the fabric. Maureen explained that there was a record system in place that ensured all the tickets eventually came back through to that office. The system ensured that whole batches had not gone missing. In addition there was a personnel office which employed another 2 girls.

When asked about her leaving Kaser Bonder to have her baby Maureen said that apart from an allowance from the government for a few months, there was no maternity pay or benefits from the factory itself.

To get to work, Maureen travelled on buses. In the morning she would make her own way on local buses. The factory buses left early to accommodate the production line staff who worked 7:50 – 17:50. The office staff started a little later and worked 8:30 – 17:50 so in the evening she was able to use the factory bus to get home.

Maureen recalls that she enjoyed working at Kayser Bondor even though there was a lot of hard work it was quite relaxed place and they had a lot of fun; everyone got on and there was no bad feeling even the bosses were nice. She describes Miss Romay (?), the factory manager as 'a very, very smart attractive woman... [they] all aspired to be like her because she had beautiful clothes and she always looked perfect..'.

When she left the factory Maureen remembers that she had a present, something for herself rather than the baby she was expecting but, unlike today, she didn't have a party or anything elaborate as it wasn't expected then.

After leaving to have her baby, Maureen says that she only worked in *Hoover's* for about a month – 6 weeks before one Christmas to get some extra money when the children were young. She recalls that working at *Hoovers* was a lot different to working at Kayser Bonder. Hoover's was much stricter; everything was done by the book. The staff just went in to work and no jokes. She says that she couldn't have worked there for long. She worked from 16:00-20:00 in the wages section. Her husband also worked for Hoover's at the time in the transport section.

Maureen explained that she had 3 children in 3 years so it was some 9 years later when her children were aged 5 and 8 she went to work part time for a firm called TBS. To fit in with school hours she worked part time from 10:00-15:00 with an hour for lunch. The firm were based at Pentrebach and made furniture. It was when her youngest started school Maureen felt she wanted to look for employment. She explains that she wrote to the firm (TBS) in August, detailing her office experience. In early September the personnel officer came to the house to ask her to go to an interview. She went for her interview and even though she explained that she could only work certain hours the firm asked her to work for them. She laughs as she explains:

‘It was funny when I went there; apparently the accountant who had interviewed me had told them I was fantastic! I’d done costing, I’d done wages, I’d done so many different things. I was going in there; I don’t know what they thought... but what really took me back was when I started work there, they didn’t even have calculators. Now this was 9 years after I had finished work which would make it about 1969. They were doing their wages, the factory people personnel on... a book...’

Although Maureen cannot remember what it was called the book may have been a type of ‘Ready Reckoner’. The factory at the time employed 200 – 250 people. After Maureen started work there they did modernise and begin to use the newer version of the comptometer which was electric and much more streamlined and touch sensitive. Maureen said she was able to ‘touch type’ on the newer calculators which was much quicker. Over the 25 years that Maureen was with TBS she continued to move round the different departments but still did costing, wages and accounts; in later years went on to use computers.

Maureen still keeps in touch with a few of her fellow workers from Kayser Bondor one, Anne (Amblin VSE022), lives opposite her. She explained that some of the others have passed away or moved out of the area. She feels that when you have families and get tied up with them you lose touch with people.

She added that, looking back, the factories were much more ‘laid back’ in the atmosphere years ago, Maureen recalls the men working in the factory, for example, the mechanics and the men who did the maintenance ‘were spoilt by the girls and teased but there was always a great atmosphere. Even with the bosses, they were pretty easy going. There may have been one or two who may be a bit strict but even then they were never that standoffish or anything they always got on with people.’

Maureen said that she did find it strange how things have changed over the years, particularly with trade unions. They were not as important when she first started working, they didn’t think they were needed but they got stronger over the years and more militant and Maureen didn’t know if that was a good thing or not. When asked why she thought the unions had become more militant: was it wages, conditions or

health & safety she felt that wages were an issue. She says that when Hoovers came to Merthyr they paid much higher wages which could have caused jealousy: some people earning so much more it was seen as unfair.

In conclusion Maureen said that she had enjoyed her working time and after she had her children she was happy to go back in fact 'she couldn't wait to get out!'

37:15

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