

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/ LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI
BURRY SON AND COMPANY, TREFOREST ESTATE (1957 -1982)

Interviewee: VSE034 Shirley Smith

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Interviewer: Catrin Edwards on behalf of Women's Archive of Wales

She confirmed her date of birth: 17/06/1935.

Her background: She was born in Station Road, Church Village. Her mother lived in Treforest and her father lived for 93 years in the Village. They were married for 64 years and 11 months. Her father was a farmer – they had dairy cows, pigs, poultry, and they delivered their own milk and bottled it, and all the harvesting. Her mother always helped with the harvesting, she did all the poultry for Christmas. Her father was a master butcher really, because the butcher's shop is up in the village –Lloyd's Bank as it is now. Her grandfather built the shop. Then her uncle took it over and her father had the farm when he married, aged 30. They moved into the farm fifty years ago last October (1963). Her sister was born in Dewi Sant Hospital (it's called now), but died of bowel cancer at 49. **'An orphan I call myself now, really, 'cos I've got no-one. And it's hard going.'**

She went to the primary school up in the Village until she was thirteen. Then she went to Beddau Secondary Modern until she was nearly fifteen, then she went to Cleves College, a private commercial college from fifteen and a half until she was seventeen. Then she came out and worked in Pontypridd for 4 and a half years in a furniture store – in the office. And then she went down to the factory and she was there for 25 and a half years. Cleves College was in Newport Road, Cardiff, by the blind centre.

She was about 22 or 23 when she started in the factory. For a while she couldn't get a job, then she saw an advert in the paper and she applied for it and she got it. She decided to finish in Pontypridd – **'it was the money'**. The money wasn't good and she was paying quite a lot for bus fare. She walked to work on the Treforest Estate after that.

4.49

Interview for job? **‘Yes, I went down to the main avenue. I very often think where did I go for the interview for the job, on the estate, on the main avenue. I think it was called The Exchange .’** She went down by bus, she can see the building in her mind, but believes they’ve taken the factories down now.

‘My factory was called “Burry Son and Company Limited” – it was a textile factory – cotton and then they went over to nylon as well. It made fabric.

Regarding the interview: **‘I know one thing that my boss always looked at was people’s hands and nails. He’ve always said that, whenever he interviewed any one for the office or for the factory itself ... staff he always looked at his hands, and he just asked me general questions. “Where I’d worked before?” and my background ...’ ‘I think he told me there and then to start on the next Monday. So, of course I had to go down to find it as well. I didn’t have a clue where to go.’** She used to get a bus to Ton-teg and then walk down through the fields, at the back of the factories, and then to the factory itself.

She started work in the morning at nine o’clock. She started from home at 8.20 to catch the bus in Ton-teg. Then it took about 20 minutes to walk down. They finished at half past five, but then, they were taking an hour for lunch. **‘But down there, there was nowhere to go for lunch, so we asked if we could lunch half an hour, and finish five.’** So it was nine to five with half an hour for lunch. They had a break on their desk at half past ten in the morning and then, about half past threeish – a break at the desk. **‘We had our lunch at the desk as well, because we had nowhere else to go.’**

Training? As she was a shorthand typist she wasn’t trained in the factory. The other workers had to be shown what to do, because they didn’t have a clue. She did any correspondence, took notes for letters and then typed them and then she would help Eileen, **it was Shirley’s job to start on the Monday morning to get the Production Chart in from the factory for the boy, ‘and then we had Production tickets, and the faults of the (workers) ... - the Inspector out in the factory would find all their faults and put it on this ticket, ... and we had a book for the Production, and we put the faults down, and then of course that was deducted out of there. They were only allowed so many faults for a day. So much was deducted out of their wages. ... and then on the ... Wednesday then it was the wages, and Eileen was doing the wages, and if she wasn’t there then, I’d go and it was Kalamazoo (?) by hand.’** This was a system for doing it all by hand – there weren’t computers like today **‘and they had a hand calculator. It was a sun lock. I don’t know what happened to it. And we just kept on going, the keys on it and pressing it, until whatever came up, you know, you’d work it and it would come up all on the screen. Now it would be a real antique.’**

10.22

Sylvia hadn’t learnt this in college – she learnt in the factory. **‘In college we did shorthand, typing, maths, spelling, ... and bookkeeping.’**

She decided to go to work in the factory, **‘Well the wages wasn’t very good (in Pontypridd) and I couldn’t afford to pay more, so, and it wasn’t until six o’clock in the night and an hour and a quarter for lunch.’** She used to come home for lunch then, and go back, which was a terrible rush, to get back for the bus. It was very low pay and paying a lump sum for her bus ticket – travelling four times a day.

She confirms – that according to Shirley’s locket, she started in the factory in 1957. **‘I started in Pontypridd for £2 9shillings. And when I went down to the factories it was £6 10 shillings (which is 50p now). And, then, after, he wouldn’t give us a rise every year as the factory (workers) had it, because they were in the Union, so every year their automatic pay went up - cost of living rise. But we had to keep asking for ours. So two or three years went by and we didn’t have anything, so he decided to up mine to £11. It was a lot then from £6 50.’**

£6 50 would be considered quite good pay – they didn’t ask for the £11. **‘I didn’t anyway. ... we’d ask, which was embarrassing, to keep asking, but no, we couldn’t have a rise ... because we weren’t in a union. .. It was embarrassing for us to keep asking. But he decided then, all of a sudden, to give us £11. I came home and said “I’m having eleven pound” I said.’**

Factory floor workers? **‘Oh, they were having much more than us in the office. Yea, much more. Because they worked shifts, and of course, night shift was higher wage than the day shift. And then, of course, overtime, they’d work overtime sometimes to eight o’clock and their hours was seven thirty to four – then they went 8 o’clock to 4.30.’** When she started there she worked every other Saturday morning – go down about 9.30 until 1 o’clock. But they gradually did away with this – it was only manning the phones and seeing to the mail. Sometimes he wouldn’t come in, so they gave up that then. And it was just five days a week.

14.56

Number in factory? – fifteen to twenty **‘fluctuated’** altogether, with the Managing Director. There was only the Managing Director in the office and Eileen and Shirley and when they became busy a gentleman came in to help them. Eileen’s husband was working in the factory, **‘but he found that the boss was saying, (that) Eileen’s wages and his wages – they should, the two of them (have) been working only for one wage! And so he said, “I’m off” he said, so he went off to Great Yarmouth and that’s where he still is.’** Eventually Eileen went too. **‘So it was left with myself and just one gentleman, come and go, come and go, they didn’t stay long, and that’s how we ended up, just myself and the gentleman.’**

There were women working in manufacturing there. **‘We had the winding shop, ... four in there, and then in the inspection it was Nella – she was the only one in inspection, and then only one lady out on the shop floor with the boys and of course, she was having a man’s rate and they didn’t agree with that, that she was having a man’s rate, but she**

was doing exactly the same work as the boys. I don't know why she was out on the factory floor ... she was there before I went there.'

On the factory floor there were knitters for the cotton and then for the nylon. Then they were warping, **'we'd have the big bobbins, and then they were warped on to the beams, the beams would be put on the machines, for the knitting.'** They'd be knitting all day long. It was very noisy and hot in the summer. **'You couldn't breathe in the summer in there. I'd take anything I wanted to talk to the boys, I'd have to take them into the mess room, because you'd be exhausted trying to talk. You couldn't speak to them over the machine. There were twenty three machines in the one shop, as long as this house, and then in the other we had six – nylon I think. But the warping was down the other end.'**

Who didn't agree that this woman had men's rates? 'the knitters ... four or five to a shift ... the men.' She didn't think the Managing Director took any notice of it.

What did you think? 'Well, we didn't have a say in it – it was nothing to do with us, really. You know, we were just in the office doing all the office work. .. I can't remember ever, the two of us, saying anything about it. ... '

Did you think it was fair ...? 'Well, at the time – it was before the time of equal pay came in you see, so, of course, that's why they didn't think much of ... but then they didn't keep on about it. Nothing could be done, so it was just forgotten. And ... then Eileen came out on the inspection then ...'

It was quite a small factory **'but we never owed a penny; never in debt; never had an overdraft, nothing at all. When the boss died there was £200,000 money in the bank without all the assets. ... That was thirty odd years ago.'**

20.10

She never considered working in the factory rather than in the office (in spite of the wages). **'Couldn't have done that, no ... you were on your feet ALL day, just walking around these machines and they were going like this all day.'** She doesn't have any needles to show. They were very fine needles and they'd be going like that ALL day long. *Was it hard work?* **'It was hard on the feet and legs, because Eileen now, she's 82, I think, is having terrible trouble with her feet. She can't stand or walk. ... and of course, it was cement floor, so it was hard on the feet and legs then. ... Eileen was the knitter with the boys. .. We had two Eileens – Eileen Evans and then Eileen Edwards , ... Eileen Edwards was in the office and Eileen Evans was out in the nylon shop then, with Eileen's husband.**

On her first day at work, she remembers going in and waiting at the hatch – thinking there was someone in there. Of course she was down there early and **'in comes the boss, he took me in the office and then waited for Eileen to come.'** She didn't arrive 'til 9.30. Then she sat down and started to show Shirley the ropes. **'All strange the first day'**. She did run the office herself for nine weeks, because Eileen had left and he didn't have a man to come in, and she was on her own. **'I didn't have any extra money. But all of a sudden, when the gold chains came in, he said "You can go and look for something for yourself, to the**

value of a £100". So I went to Bridgend to a good jewellers and it was £120, so I put the £20 myself. So I got the chain, just an ordinary chain, and I had that for nine weeks for working on my own. Because of course, right at the end of the week you had to come down to balance everything - balance and the petty cash, balance with the wages and then with all the petty cash – so I had to do all ... which I liked very much, I like handling money.'

23.27

She thought at the time that that was a generous gift, 'Yea, I did, yea'.

The conditions in the factory weren't very good, 'but it was an old factory, very old. The chairs we had were kitchen chairs, and I've got the pads out there now, the pads to sit on. Oh, because sitting on those wooden chairs – it was .. Oh! he had a plush one for himself and a big posh in the end after the floods – he had a new desk and a new swivel chair, but we didn't, we had to just use what was there. .. ' There was her desk and in the middle was an old table, and there was Eileen's desk and there was the typewriter there.' I've got pictures of me in it and I'm knitting, because I used to have a fortnight of the factory holidays to go down and man the phones and see to the mail, so, of course there was nothing else to do, so I'd sit and knit. And then I had my holidays in July. Always had a fortnight before they did.'

There was a toilet, and 'we didn't have hot water. ... There was a very old geyser there, it went wrong and he did buy us a new geyser ... for hot water for our hands.' There were two toilets and a hand wash basin. But there was nothing to hang a towel 'so I said "I'm going to buy a roller ... to hold the towel" So she did that. Then with their tea things, 'they were using the bottle, and they were using – it was tea then, there wasn't teabags of course, so, I got a milk jug and I got .. Oh! he would have cups and saucers, the Boss would have cups and saucers, we did have cups and saucers, but then I bought a teapot and I made a tea cosy, and I did that. What else did I do then, to try to bring it up-to-date?' It was very sparse, nothing – no luxuries at all.

'The boys out there – they had a mess room and he did have a little portable, not a portable – a table gas stove which was strike a match and it all came out in my face one day – to warm something – to boil a kettle on the top. We didn't have electric kettles.

They would mix with the other women and the boys, the foreman and the head foreman. 'Oh, I'd go into the mess room of a lunchtime to them, because it was quiet then, you see, because it was all shut off. Yea all the boys were alright to me, yea.'

27.30

There was one in particular – Len, if you wanted something done, e.g. the latch of the door, he'd pretend he couldn't do it at the time but all the time he'd be behind her with a hammer – he was wonderful, he was. He left and went to work in Plymouth.

She got on with the men alright. She didn't go out socially with them. **'We did have a Christmas get together which Eileen and myself, we'd arrange it. Otherwise we wouldn't have had anything for Christmas. ... But we had to pay for it ourselves. The Boss wouldn't pay for it. ... Yes it was quite nice to get together like that, because people were talking out in the factory – because one morning I was out there and he said "Oh, come on", he said, .. but I mean, those girls were talking to me. But he wouldn't allow socialising on the shop floor, like.'**

She thinks the workers would have been allowed to talk to one another while they were working. **'But then they needed to watch you see, because these needles – if one went you'd have a big ladder all the way down in the material. So they had to keep their eye on that all the time.'** They did talk in their break time and in the morning and in their lunch time.

'What about music, did they ...?'

Oh, the Boss wouldn't have music. No nothing, nothing at all, no.' They wouldn't have been able to hear it in the factory anyway, because of the noise of the machines - **'they were really noisy machines'**. They didn't have any protective clothing or for their ears. They should have had. **'No, it was before the time of all this health and safety.'**

Dangerous? No, not really. She doesn't remember any accidents. They had an Accidents Book, but they didn't have any accidents.

'It was very, very hot. The strip lighting all down on the machines, you see, for them to see the knitters knitting. ... Each side of the machine they had the strip lighting.' It was hot in winter as well. The bottom parts of all the windows were all frosted glass – since the wartime. They were the same in the office **'That's why I hate frosted glass.'** She used to get up on the radiator pipe to open the window to look out. In the office – (it was) very hot and Eileen smoked as well, **'Oh, it used to be blue. And she'd light up and put it on the ashtray and let the smoke go ... I couldn't believe, ... freaking out ..and she wouldn't have that much window open for it to go out. ... As soon as she come in she'd light one up, ... I was a passive smoker really, at the time but I didn't think of it. And the Boss was smoking. I've got the ashtray upstairs, I've seen it like that, up like that.'** Then he gave it up overnight, because he found an ulcer. And then he thought smoking was 'a very dirty habit.'

32.40

He had an office of his own. The end of it was called The Board Room **'why it was called the Board Room, I don't know. It was just – there were a few chairs in there – we never had any Board Meetings really.'** The people on the factory floor smoked on the job, **'now to think of it with that cotton, it was dangerous. ... and nylon just melts, doesn't it?'**

Her work changed by the day – she did different things on Mondays etc – and everything had to be done to finish on Friday. The petty cash had to balance on Friday. Then on Monday

morning they'd have the sheets in again, - they worked a week in hand, and then they'd start all over again. Her work didn't change during the whole time she was there.

There wasn't a problem with being married in the factory – Eileen didn't want to go and leave her mother who was rearing her little boy when her husband went to Great Yarmouth to live. In the end she joined him after getting an ultimatum from him.

Shirley wasn't encouraged to go to night school to improve her skills. **'Another thing we didn't have – there was no pension schemes. He didn't believe in anything like that. It was all to make his own money you know'**

She wasn't in a trade union. The workers were in the textile union – but she can't remember its name. There weren't any disputes there; **'just carry on all the time.'** No strikes.

Mostly she and the other workers were fairly treated. He was a good employer though he never wanted to give them a rise.

36.50

Her employer was a Czechoslovakian Jew and he came over (before her time) and started with Stuart Singlan (?) which was across the road on the estate. Then in c. 1940-41 he started up on his own and he had a sleeping partner up in London. He would come down every so often, but he was the Managing Director and did everything – buying everything - buying the machines. His name was Carol Bergman. She didn't know anything about his personal life, **'I've learnt more from the paper cuttings, now that I've read, because he never said anything.'** He had a wife, Mrs Bergman, what happened to her and that she had a boy in the concentration camp, and Eva. He took Eva on and named her Eva Bergman. **'He never had a social life himself, he didn't go out with other men, nothing like that or anything, for an evening.'** He went to work and went home every night, the same. He died in the airport on his way to Switzerland. **'And that day we were taken over by Burlington Fabrics, then over Caerphilly, so we had to go over there then.'** Uncertain of year.

With her wages, - they were all paid in cash. She would go on Thursday afternoon to the bank and pick the wages up, for the night shift, - put them out ready for the foremen, ready for the night shift foremen to come in. They worked four ten hour shifts - nights, and then five days eight hour shifts. Everybody had cash in envelopes. She lived at home all the time. **'Oh yes, my mother every Friday night, the two of us, yea, hand out - we always, my mother kept our wages until we were both twenty one, and gave us pocket money; but when we were twenty one it was yours then to do and to look after. And then we had to give, she believed in it – board and lodge.'** She doesn't know whether twenty one was the general age for this, **'because our mother didn't believe in letting us have all our wages because we wouldn't know the value of money, if we were thinking every Friday, we'd have that "Oh, we'll go and spend it" and then we'd have nothing left for the week. ... No, no we had to bring ours home every Friday and she'd sit down, two of us, put her hand out.'**

41.42

When she was young she had to make her pocket money do for the week. **'I had 6 and 6 (6s.6d)'**. She didn't have to pay for her transport out of that – it was paid out of her wages. With clothes – her mother paid. The pocket money was only for sweets or chocolates. They weren't allowed to go to the pictures. They did go to youth club in the Village, and Janet went to the Young Farmers, but she didn't. She did buy records but not very often. When she worked in the shop, she had to come home on her Tuesday afternoon off to do all the ironing. In the summer when it was light in the evenings she had to go out in the garden. In winter they all sat in one room, not this business – going up to their bedrooms. They didn't have a wireless or television.

She was brought up that she was never broke, and didn't buy anything unless you had the money in your hand. No credit at all, no. They had to look after their clothes – put them away in winter and bring out summer clothes - sandals. When they had bikes they had to look after them. She worked for her father since she was 7 years old, but neither she nor her sister got a penny. She's having a chance to buy things for herself now. Never went to the hairdressers, never smoked – **'my father said "come by that door there with a cigarette (fag he said) I'll ram it down your throat and hope it will choke you."** Her mother advised them that by buying a jumper or cardigan she would have something to keep, but with a cigarette – nothing.

46.37

Holidays started in April and they had Easter Monday and Tuesday off, Whit Monday, then last week of July, first week of August. But she'd have the last week of June and first week of July – she worked in the fortnight the factory was off. Then Christmas they'd have two weeks off – one was the Christmas week and before and New Year's Day. But then the workers wanted **'the last two weeks of August off'** and they had this for several years (this was changed, then) – **'it wasn't so crowded they said.'** The Bank holidays were paid holidays. **For the fortnight they got basic wages only – no bonuses.** She describes what she would do in the factory during the holidays (see above) – and she'd leave about two in the afternoon. He went away as well then. It was a rest for her and she enjoyed it!

She was on her own in the factory **'and it was eerie, after all that noise, and to walk out into the factory, it was really eerie, it was.'** When she had time off she went on holiday – her first holiday was with her friend June to Bournemouth. Then with Joyce to Cornwall; and before her sister started work the three of them went on a coach tour to Switzerland. One year they went from Land's End to John of Groats, abroad again to Italy, Austria, Jersey, Guernsey. She hasn't been on holiday for 20 years because her parents were getting older, her sister died 21-22 years ago. Now she hasn't got anyone to go with.

She asked for a day off for her sister's wedding and she had to take it off because she couldn't make it up – he did pay her for this. 'He didn't believe in holidays, because he used to say "It's not another Bank Holiday again!'. He was a workaholic.'

53.05

Asked to describe the Treforest estate when she worked there:

‘All the old factories from the war, the real, real old factories ... because we’d go to Tonteg on the bus, then we’d go down through the one field, down through the other, and then come down, and we’d walk through GECs, and then, and Oh! Liners’ was there – and the smell from Liners, Oh! the bone factory ... gelatine with all the bones, Oh-h-h! ...

I’d go round ... GEC, DCL, and then Chrome Leather, Western Board, Aero Zip, Treforest Zinc Printers and then Liners’. GEC – the smell from the canteen when they made chips ... then Robinson’s Flooring, then Stuart Singlan, Plastic Engineers, Homerton’s, then Elliot’s Glass and then, by here, there was Rosedale. They were a small block in a big block. She can’t remember the name of the factory next door to them. Down on the main avenue – State Printers (?), Co-op shoes, KLG, BOAC, Copygraph, .. there was the Blind down there, there was a big Remploy down on the main avenue.

Outside their office there was the bus station for all the buses from the valleys – if she caught the bus up through Treforest it would take **‘Half an hour at least, because it would stop start, stop start...’** There would be singledeckers and doubledeckers – **‘it was chock a block with buses’** and now it’s all derelict.

The buses would come about quarter to five – what a noise! Then it went to all cars. At one time she had to walk on her own, so she wouldn’t come through the fields. There would be about 12 of them walking down together – going to different factories.

57.15

When her boss died the factory was taken over by Burlington. They used to be at the back of them and it was called Burlington Gloves, but when they went over there (Caerphilly) they became Burlington Fabrics. This was a much bigger factory than their’s and they did all types of material. She was never told – she had to just go in there and mix with the girls. ‘And they were, Oh dear, dear, dear – really fancied themselves and no... they didn’t have a penny to bless themselves. And they looked down their nose at us as if we were riff-raff. The Office Manager as well (looking over his glasses).’

She just sort of went to work there but she wasn’t interested at all. She was given the job of cashing up the factory shop every night, but **‘I didn’t like it there, it was just one of those things, I didn’t like it there. So then, he called us in and he made us redundant and I had the large sum of £3050 and he thought he was giving me the earth. ... it wasn’t much, was it, after 31 years of working – putting the two together?’** They’ve changed hands lots of times since she left – all gone now. She was made redundant when she was 54 (1989). She was on the dole afterwards for 12 month, then she had to live on her savings for 12 month - she wasn’t entitled to a penny; then she went to the social services in Broadway House, Pontypridd, – she did 13 weeks there from 9 until 1, she had £60 a week, she put stamps on and then she had another year and then she didn’t have a penny until she had her pension.

1.00.37

Did she enjoy in the factory?

Yes, Oh yes, I did. She was never bored. She didn't have a thing when she left. She only had these different things because she asked for it to show what she had done. She had it inscribed / engraved with another year inside the bracelet. I got a brandy with another so many years. The boss gave her this. But '**none of us had a thing when we finished**', though some had been there years. She mentions Arthur and Howard in particular - they were both foremen.

Looking back now – she feels that it was a good time – She and Eileen never had a cross word and (she only had a cross word with) two of the chaps who came in there – they wanted to take over – but then she had 'a lovely one' – he was 63 and he came in until he was 65 and then 'lo and behold, he went home one night and sat in a chair and died.' He was a director in Zinc Printers, and they finished him off there, so he came over and enjoyed it. He was a big smoker, who gave up smoking and then he died.

Does she keep in touch with the old workforce?

Eileen died two years ago September. Her husband still has a house in Trehafod, so he still comes down. He brought Gareth with him – he's 52 now but the last time she saw him he was a 'lovely little boy.' The other Eileen is in Ferndale but she didn't get a card from her last Christmas. There is also a cleaner who lives in Hawthorne and they telephone occasionally – she's 94 now. Then there was Nella, in inspection, Shirley looked after her a lot towards the end – taking her to the hospital – describes her ailments, died three years ago. Idris in Ynysybwl might still be alive. Otherwise they've all died.

The white cotton they made in the factory was used for police gloves, it was 100% cotton, and the chamois of whatever colour were used for lens' cleaners – in glasses cases. Pieces used to be made into swatches to send to customers – describes how Eileen would cut and bend them over and staple them to send to customers as colour swatches. The nylon was made into gloves and then they started to make dress fabrics with the nylon. She shows examples of their products '**that's lovely in it?**' The raw material would be sent up to Nottingham to be dyed and then be brought back to them in rolls, and then the orders they got for the rolls would be sent to Hong Kong – all the colours, to be made into gloves. And all the glove factories around would be having the fabric to make into gloves and they wouldn't see it after.

DIWEDD Y CYFWELIAD/ END OF INTERVIEW

67:53