

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/LLEISIAU O LAWR Y FFATRI

Sidroy Mills, Y Barri / Barry

Hanes ysgrifenedig / Written history

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Account of the two sisters' work at Sidroy Mills Barry. (No audio interview).

Women in the Factory

After the 2nd World War, instead of the population being encouraged to move home in order to seek employment, the Labour Government directed industry to areas where employment opportunities were needed. As a result, the Sidroy Underwear Factory was established in Barry. At first, the factory operated from two local buildings in Cadoxton which were adapted to house machinery needed to produce the finished products.

Later, a purpose built factory was opened at Palmerston, Barry, which is now occupied by the Supermarket, Waitrose. The business was owned by a Jewish family, Feltz, probably displaced from another country by events which took place during World War Two. The General Manager was a Mr Brooks who also appeared to have Jewish connections. Then next in line came Mr Brailey, under Manager, who had been drafted in from London. A sickly looking man who it was said that he had been exempt from Military Service due to ill health.

The workforce was composed mainly of women who operated the electrically operated sewing machines. A small number of women were chosen to operate cutting machines. Their task was to cut through layers of material following outlines of patterns. These were then passed on to the machinists to complete not only underwear but also blouses and nightwear. A few female 'trusties' were promoted from the main workforce to patrol the lines of machinists, check the standard of workmanship and to discourage any chatting. Two female clerical workers were employed as Office Staff as well as a Nurse who administered First Aid at times listened with a sympathetic ear to employees

personal problems. Maintenance of machinery was the responsibility of one or two male employees.

Although my sister and I had won a Scholarship to attend the local Grammar School at the age of 10+, due to our working class background we were unable to continue with our education after the age of 16. Several of our contemporaries at school either went on to higher education colleges or were able to attend Commercial Colleges where they learned typing skills enabling them to acquire employment in newly created Government Departments such as the Department of Health and Social Security.

Unable to acquire employment in the clerical field, I started work at the Sidroy Mills in approximately 1946, with my sister joining me in approximately 1947.

Although women who worked in the factory were regarded with disdain by some members of the public,(those factory girls!) on the whole they were an intelligent lot who, like my sister and I, were held back by the lack of opportunities available for women (and men) at that time.

Although the 'trustees' stamped down on any idle chatter, that didn't stop us from singing. The war time 'Music While You Work' ethic lived on with one or two women starting to hum a tune and before long, most female workers joined in with the words of a popular song. It helped to pass the time away. We worked on a Piece Work system, getting paid according to how many items were completed. A certain number of machinists were selected to be timed on how long they took to complete each garment. The average time was then applied as a base line for payment for a completed item.

Feeling under pressure by the patrolling supervisors, the selected machinists worked as fast as possible ignoring the possibility of toilet breaks or even to wipe noses. As a result, wages were kept low.

The working hours extended from 8a.m. until approximately 5 p.m. with a break for lunch. A canteen was available for workers to obtain meals or they could choose to bring their own packed lunch. On a fine day, it was usual to take advantage of the break and spend time outdoors within the grounds of the factory. On arrival at 8 a.m. we clocked in to verify our arrival for work, and then clocked out at the end of the day. During winter, we set off from home in the dark, and returned home in the dark.

Although conditions of work were not too bad compared to the sweat shops in the East end of London, my sister and I felt that the employees had insufficient representation to air any problems which could crop up. As members of a radical thinking family, our thoughts automatically turned to the absence of Trade Union membership. Seeking guidance from adults involved in other occupations, we decided to canvas our fellow workers in order to encourage them to become members of an organisation which would unite and support them and ensure that their rights under the Factory Act were respected and not ignored should the occasion arise.

After a false start by advocating the Transport and General Workers Union, we were successful in forming a local Branch of the National Taylor & Garment Workers Union, a Trade Union with its roots firmly established in London's East End. Using our break time to collect membership subscriptions from the female workforce did not go down well with Management. One day, we were summoned to the Factory office by Mr Bailey who did not think it was appropriate for us to use 'a concession by the Firm' in order to use it for purposes other than a chance to relax and have a snack.

We had the strong impression that we were being discouraged from Trade Union activity. Determined to proceed with our plans, we made an appointment to consult a local, leading Trade Union supporter to ask his advice. He reacted by contacting the local Press as a result of which, headlines the next day proclaimed that 'Trade Union membership was being discouraged at a Local Underwear Factory.' This embarrassing revelation led to a change of heart at the Sidroy Mills with Management complying with our aim to create a local Branch of the Taylor & Garment Workers Union. At the first General Meeting, members were elected to fill the posts of Chairman, Secretary and Treasurer, with my sister and I elected as Chair and Secretary of the Branch and when properly established, members elected us as delegates to the local Trade Union Council.

Attendance at T.U.C. meetings was a nerve wracking experience for us being much younger than the other, all male delegates who were accomplished, speakers, with strong, assured voices with which they were able to press their point of view. During early meetings, we sat there speechless, until at one meeting in approximately 1953, we made our Maiden Speech. At that time, the Underwear Trade in Great Britain was experiencing a slump due to Competition from Japan where factories were producing garments at much lower cost than the U.K. Japanese machinists worked longer hours for little remuneration. As a result, their products were available at a much lower cost than British goods.

My sister was the first to speak on the threat that cheap imports posed to our own industries which could lead to redundancies. I then spoke in support of the relevant points she had made. When we had finished our speeches, delegates clapped and shouted 'Here, Here' in the customary language of agreement.

During the following years as Trade Union Representatives, we were privileged to meet renowned politicians and trade unionists of that era. Amongst them were Mrs Dorothy Rees M.P., the first woman M.P. for the Vale of Glamorgan, Mr Victor Feather of the National T.U.C. and Lloyd George's sister.

Eventually, after marriage, my sister and I left the factory to settle down to family life which was the custom in those days. As our children reached school age, our lives branched off in a different direction. After the necessary approval of Social Services, We set up separate community Playgroups in our own areas.

Our work with children and parents from many backgrounds proved most fulfilling. Spurred on by our social conscience, we also organised a pressure group to promote

retention of a small local park, public library and town hall for community purposes as opposed to local Authority plans to commercially redevelop part of the site. I feel pleased to say that our campaign was successful and when we see local youngsters playing in the small park, we feel a sense of pride.

Looking back on our early working life in the Sidroy Mills, we acknowledge the comradeship shared between fellow machinists. The sewing skills we learned provided us with the ability to create clothing for our young families. When household budgets were stretched, we were able to turn sewing to our advantage by repairing items, making winter coats and suits out of unused adult coats, buying material to make dresses and creating our own styles.

The Sidroy Mills eventually closed many years ago but the original building remains as a modern supermarket – Waitrose! When former machinists enter the building to do their shopping, do they imagine the whirr of machinery and the chorus of voices as I sometimes do?