

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/ LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI

Guest Keen and Nettlefold (GKN) - Splott, Distillers – Barry

Interviewee: VSE041 Janet Taylor

DOB: 20/12/41

Date: 2/4/14

Interviewer: Catrin Edwards on behalf of Women's Archive of
Wales/Archif Menywod Cymru

00:05 So could you tell me your name and date of birth please?

It's Janet Taylor and I was born 20.12.41.

00:20 Tell me a little bit about your background. Where you were born, your mother your father what they did for a living and your siblings.

Well my mother worked in a laundry you know up until she had me. My father worked in Curran Steels and I was born up in Maerdy up the Rhondda. That's because I was born when the blitz was on and we'd lost some family members in the bombing so my mother was evacuated to have me and I've got one brother who is now 67 so um mother was not at all happy up in Maerdy, a bit too enclosed for her so when I was 3 weeks old she came back to Grangetown. So really I'm from Grangetown and um we lived in the same house as my grandparents and like a lot of other properties it was rental we had a landlady and my grandparents lived in the kitchen and we lived in the middle room and when my mother's sister got married she and her husband were in the front room like lots of other families, but then we moved to Fairwater in 1952 when all the estates were built after the war. Then we were there 58 years until my mother died 4 years ago and I just came here then to live.

So tell me about your education where did you go to school primary and secondary then?

First school was Grange Council then when we moved to Fairwater I went to Herbert Thompsons in Ely for a twelve month. That was 1952-53 and then I went to grammar school, Cardiff High School for girls until I was 16 well going on 17 really and I finished school then and that was when I started work.

02:28 So why did you finish school at that point then?

Well, we needed the money really and I didn't really like school so it didn't bother me.

So you didn't want to go on and on?

No

So what did you decide to do then?

Well, first of all I worked in a prescription pricing bureau for 11 weeks you know just a job and then I got the job in Nettlefolds in the Lab and while I was working there I went to technical college, it was day release, an ordinary national certificate in Chemistry so um that was as far as I went you know the only national certificate I didn't go any further. Well I did try but I'm afraid it really wasn't for me then it just got a bit difficult.

Do you have any qualifications going to the lab?

Yes I did Chemistry and Physics and Biology, Maths. You know the two English's and French and what was the other one? History.

So you did your O' Levels?

So tell me then how did you get the job did you have to have an interview?

In the Steel Works? Yes, I was talking to friends about this the other day. I went to see the chap who was the Chemist I suppose in charge of the lab and he was a very nice man. He said to me so you'd like to come here to work would you? I said oh yes I'd like to work in the lab and ok he said, start when you can and that was it. Somebody else I knew who worked there she said that when she went to an interview she said but I don't know anything about Chemistry. That's alright he said, can you follow a recipe? She said yes, oh you'll be alright.

So were you given any kind of training?

People showed you what to do you know because it was an analytical control lab really and there were different methods of measuring the different elements that were in the steel oh you know sulphur, magnesium all that sort of thing and so people would always show you what to do and you would work with somebody for a while and then you'd be left on your own. It

was quite straight forward really, but I don't remember anything being written down. It may have been I must ask someone.

So did you know anybody when you went to work there? Did you know anybody else who worked in there?

Not in the lab. I knew one of my school friends worked in staff wages and I spoke to her the other night and um she went there straight from school as well but I didn't know anybody in the lab but it was fine. They were a really nice bunch of people there.

06:02 So tell me what the company was called and what they manufactured there.

Well it was Guest Keen and Nettlefolds. I don't think they made the steel there I think it was made over what became GKIS, you know on the road where... is it called East Tyndall Street now? It was the very big steel works. I think it used to be Richards, Thomas and Baldwins at one time but they used to roll the steel in Castle works and there was a nail factory and rod works and things like that, so they didn't actually make the steel there. They didn't do the steel making process, but it was quite an interesting place to work, because there were trains going back and forth you know from collecting stuff and taking it up to the main lines I suppose and you had to be careful when you walked across to the lab because you crossed a few lines you know a few tracks. I think it was the same as lots of places if you work with a lot of nice people you can enjoy it and we did used to have some fun, I must admit.

So tell me about your first day there. Can you remember your first day and walking in and what it felt like?

No I can't remember that. I was a bit nervous I must admit but um they were all very friendly and there were a couple of girls there that were my age and I think I was, I'm not sure that any of the other girls did Chemistry. I know the one girl didn't because she told me and I actually went on the day release course and I was the only one that did. The boys had to go you know it was part of their apprenticeship and they had to do the day release but I was the only girl that did it.

08:19 So was it seen as an apprenticeship or was it seen as something else?

I don't think the lads you know the boys who went on the Chemistry courses I suppose it was part of their um employment because they had to go that was it. Well it was when I went there but I don't know what happened later on, but um the girls didn't have to go at all. Do you know I was only thinking about this the other day and I thought well I expect the boys had to go because like an apprenticeship, whereas the girls did all the donkey work really and weren't expected to improve themselves and I thought oh yes that's probably what it was and it had never occurred to me before to think of it like that.

0:09 Although in a way you went there with qualifications and you were obviously a bright girl.

Yes, well I don't know about that.

How many 'O' Levels did you get?

Eight.

So you had qualifications?

So how many women worked in the lab and how many men?

Oh heck.

How big was the lab to start off with how many people worked there do you think?

There were quite a few worked there. There must have been 6 or 8 girls worked there and they also had a micro room because it was all done by microscope work and the lads that worked in there were doing metalogy and I think that they were you know following a metallurgy course, but there were quite a few lads worked in the part where I was as well and it must have been about 4 of them and sometimes you'd get a couple more come in and things like that but I can actually remember somebody, one of the lads saying once, because it was all very routine analysis and there was lots of it. You know you could have 60 samples to analyse and get it done by 11 O'clock because then another lot would come in then and somebody must have said to one of these chaps um, well come and give us a hand, or you can do that you know. He said, I don't do routine analysis I go to Tech and I'm doing a college course kind of thing and when I think about it I think yes we were just there to do all the donkey work really. But mind there was one lady there; she was a bit older than me. She'd been to Cardiff High School as well... and there was a chap sort of responsible for the analytical side of the lab and she sort of worked for him and I think she had a degree and he did as well. But the rest of it was all pretty routine stuff.

11:40 So take me through a day's work then. When did you go in in the morning to begin with?

We had to be there by 9 o'clock and they used to have work's buses picked us up at the general station and took us straight to the gates.

Were those laid on? Were they free paid for by the company?

Yes, I think they were free if I remember rightly and all the office staff would be on them, everybody you know and you would have to clock in and they had special clocking in sheds and it was the old fashioned you know you had a card and you put it in the right slot and if

you clocked the wrong card you could be sacked. It was a lot different then and I clocked the wrong card one day. Somebody had put their card in my slot by mistake so I got over to the lab and I said I don't know what to do and they said oh ring wages department and tell them now and that's all I did and I said look I'm sorry.

It was that bad was it?

Yes, I mean one of the girls who worked in the little office attached to the lab; she had the sack for being late. She was not a good time keeper; it was that she had trouble getting up in the morning. They wrote to her once and said that if it happened again she would have to finish. She just had trouble getting out of bed in the mornings and they sacked her, so things were very strict then. A lot different from today. No flexi time then.

So you started at 9 then?

Yes and finished at 5.

So how many breaks did you have during the day?

Well we used to stop for lunch. We used to make coffee in the lab because you know we didn't go over to the canteen for a break because we didn't have time because there was too much going on and were having to finish one lot of analysis before the next lot of steel samples came up. So, people would make coffee or tea you know in the lab and we went over to the canteen for lunch but I think there were about 4 canteens in Nettlefold. There was a canteen for the workers, one for the staff, one for the monthly paid staff and one for the directors and they sort of improved as you went up the ladder.

So if you were monthly paid you were higher up the food chain were you?

Yes, yes it was strange.

So what was the canteen like the one you went to?

The canteen I went to it wasn't too bad. I mean on Fridays they used to do plaice and chips and that plaice was very nice. I always remember that and a bit like school dinners really. The puddings were always nice, you know the bread and butter pudding that sort of thing and steam puddings and custard you know all the old fashioned puddings that we all used to like.

15:19 So did you eat in the canteen often or did you used to take your own?

I used to go there every day, we all used to.

Was it reasonable priced wise?

Yes, it was subsidised yes and we all used to work Saturday mornings then when I started there and you used to get one Saturday morning off in three, but that was a bit of a bind.

So how many hours a week did you work then?

Um, it was 8 until 5. That's um 8 until 5 five days a week. Oh sorry 9 till 5 five days a week and then 9 till 12 on Saturday. That's 8 hours a day isn't it?

Yes except for the hour for lunch. Did you have an hour for lunch?

Yes.

They probably didn't count that.

No probably.

So it's 38 hours then.

Yes.

what about an afternoon break?

We just made something in the lab again, yes.

So take me through like work then what would you do when you had these samples coming in?

Yes, they used to bring those up there was a part of the lab downstairs where they prepared the steel samples because it wouldn't be big lumps of steel they used to shave like shavings of it you know and the first thing to do was weigh out all these different samples. Very often there would be 60 and the balances we had were not electronic they were the old fashioned swing balances and some people had it off to a fine art you know they were really quick. Then you'd go through the whole process of the analysis and you know get the results and everything and then somebody, there were a couple of people there who used to wash up the apparatus and then 11 o'clock usually another lot came in and you know we'd start it all again. Then you'd get another lot in the afternoon, so it was quite busy and some days were worse than others you know and I can remember somebody saying once that um there was a problem with one of the samples that we had analysed and very often you know we'd have to go back and do it again and check and make sure and this one sample we said well it's exactly the same as it was before. Oh crumbs, the ship's on its way to Malaysia. You know things like that, which we all thought was a hoot.

So what were you analysing for?

It was, we used to do phosphorous, manganese, silicon, carbon, sulphur and I'm sure there were a few others I've missed out. Lead we used to do quite a few different things, quite a few you know, elements you'd be looking for because different types of steel have different specifications of the elements that have to be in them you know, because we used to do and it's the one thing I always remember. We used to analyse one steel called GK 60 and that was concrete reinforcing rods. Whenever I see a building going up on concrete rods I think ooh I wonder if that's GK 60. Not anymore I shouldn't think.

19:15 You weren't making the steel so they were analysing someone else's steel?

Yes, yes it was what they were actually sending out. Whether I don't know, they didn't actually make it there so whether they added any elements you know because of course it would be hot in the furnaces I suppose when they rolled it so whether they ever added any elements there I don't know. You know, so the things like manganese or the rest of it I'm not sure.

Do you think they maybe as well were providing a service for the place that made the steel?

Yes, perhaps yes. Do you know I'm not really sure?

Because you didn't make it I was wondering why.

Yes, yes. I don't think they made it there. I've got a friend's son who well of course it comes under Salsa now a Spanish company but I could easily ask Rita's husband he worked there. He worked downstairs. I was talking to him the other night about it.

So how did you hear about the work by the way, did you go for a job there specifically?

Because of my friend in staff wages she said there's a job coming up in the lab so that was how I went there.

What did you have to wear in the lab?

Oh we used to wear white coats. It was so hot there we used to strip off to our underwear and put the white coats on but very often they were covered in holes anyway so we used to wrap them around to hide the holes and we didn't wear stockings because you'd drop acid on them and you know so we all wore sandals and flip flops you know those sort of things. Bare foot, bare legs and we used to go across to the canteen like that, even when there was snow on the ground. No wonder we all had bad backs.

So you'd splash acid on your legs rather than your stockings then?

Yes the overalls we'd wear them quite long yes because you'd wash it off your legs you know and I think we didn't take the overalls home to wash. They were done by GKN.

So were they provided by GKN?

Yes

Were they cotton or were they nylon?

They were cotton, thick cotton yes.

Which was better really.

Oh yes, because I mean with the heat in there nylon would have been awful.

22:13 Why was it so hot in there?

What they had there was four huge hot plates. There were two back to back and they were in the middle of the lab and there were extractor fans above them and it really did get very hot.

So you had to heat?

Yes, I think what we used to do for most of the analysis you dissolved the steel in acid first and you know that's when you could add all the different um chemicals to show up whatever you were looking for and you know if you did manganese the colour, it was all done by colour spectrometry then and I think manganese was sort of a purply colour as well as I can remember and we had instruments that would read the colour and um we did do a couple of analysis that were I think that was carbon and sulphur where you burned the steel in like a little furnace. It put it in little boats and the carbon one the carbon would burn off. They'd be passing oxygen over it so you'd get carbon dioxide which would then go and get dried through sulphuric acid or something like that into I can't remember what the blooming stuff was, it used to get absorbed into and you would weigh these things to find out how much carbon you know the steel contained.

That's what you're doing in the photograph?

Yes, see I was doing that there, yes.

So apart from these overalls cotton were you given any protective clothing?

Rubber gloves and I had um; I'd get dermatitis from rubber gloves. I had it really bad when I was a, I didn't know I had dermatitis I was going to get the problem it was just and they were rubber gloves and they didn't have, you know you can get them with cloth lining now. They weren't like that. They were just rubber. God it was awful.

So you were saying about the rubber gloves?

Yes, well it's a common problem. You know lots of people get it. My mother always had a problem and my dad and my brother does as well so I bought some white cotton gloves in Boots the chemist and I used to put them inside. Otherwise I would have had to give it up because it was quite bad.

What about masks or anything were you protected from fumes, I mean were there any fumes coming off?

Yes, but because you put the samples on a hot plate that was underneath an extractor fan, the fumes would be taken away, but I mean it used to get a bit hairy there sometimes.

And no protective footwear either?

No no, it was a lot different then.

25:49 So do you think the work was dangerous in any way?

Yes it was. I mean we'd be handling concentrated sulphuric acid and I'm sure somebody dropped a bottle of ammonia there one day and a bottle was 2.5 litres and that was a bit noxious and you could have some nasty burns. One chap, well it wasn't one the chaps that worked on the analysis side. He was an older man and he was an odd job man, he was very badly burned by acid. There was an accident there when I was there. That was awful and he wasn't a young man.

So what happened to him?

Well, he and another chap they'd had chemicals delivered and there were six of these big bottles you know in a cardboard crate, a cardboard box with like things to hold and that's what they were doing and the cardboard box gave way and this poor chap was the one that was down below and all the acid and his, it was awful. It really was terrible and I knew one of his daughter-in-laws and she said oh she said he was never the same after. She said he was really badly burned.

Did he come back to work?

No I don't think he did.

What about compensation?

I don't know. I don't know what happened about that.

Do you remember any other you know accidents or people being injured?

Not in the lab. I mean we used to have cuts and splashes of acid. You'd get mouthfuls of acid but dilute acid you know because you'd be using pipettes and I think it's happened to everybody I know that's worked in the lab.

So what would happen if you had a mouthful of acid?

Well you would usually just spit it out and wash it out and your mouth just felt all furry and your teeth would be on edge afterwards. I don't think they do that anymore.

Were you made aware of health and safety and things when you worked there?

I think I was, you know as you were learning how to you know do a process you would be told this is acid be careful and um if you were using these large bottles of chemicals you know be careful but when I think about it it was quite a dangerous place to work.

29:00 Were there sort of rules and regulations about what you should and shouldn't do?

No, I mean the one thing that those people who work in chemistry labs remember is that you don't add water to sulphuric acid you do it the other way around and if you were using caustic soda and you were adding water you had to be careful with that but the one thing that frightened me there they used cyanide. When I think of it now.

What did you think at the time?

I didn't like using the cyanide I must admit. Probably read too much Agatha Christie, but I didn't like using that and very often I could smell it as well and it's that almond smell as well yes so I didn't care for that. When I think about it it was a bit of a hairy place to work really.

Can you remember how much you were paid?

When I started £2 ten shillings a week.

What did you do with that money; did you used to keep it all?

No no, my mother used to give me 15 shillings and she had the rest and gosh if we had a rise of 5 shillings a week we thought we were in clover.

So did you have a rise I mean when did you get a rise?

You had a rise on your birthday up until a certain age and I can remember when I got to earning £5 per week. I thought my gosh I feel like a millionaire.

What did it feel like though earning that much money at the time you know did it feel like a good/ok wage when you were that age?

Yes I suppose it did really. Everyone was getting more or less the same, apart from the men of course. The boys in the lab got paid more than we did.

And how much did they get then?

I don't know how much it was.

Was it much more?

I think it may have been yes, it wasn't just 5 shillings and um I can understand women you know feeling bitter about that because um you know very often all the girls would be running around like lunatics and the boys would be sat down, but they were you know being trained, they were going to college and they didn't do things like that. They weren't all like that I must admit. Some of them would come and give you a hand, but they did get paid more than us.

So what did you do with your money? You know you said you had 15 shillings a week and it was a weekly wage.

Yes.

So your mother gave you 15 shillings what did you do with that?

I used to go and watch Cardiff play rugby, go to the cinema, buy some stockings if you had enough. It didn't last very long, but it lasted a lot longer than it would today. Yes but I mean if you've just left school and you're not used to having money anyway 15 shillings wasn't too bad and we were all in the same boat. Everybody was the same.

Did you used to buy music back then?

I'm trying to remember when I had my first little record player um I can't remember when it was now. It must have been in the 50's. Yes and um yes I used to buy whatever was new. The first record I bought was um oh it's gone, it was the teddy bears I know they sang it, but I used to buy the sort of popular music because things were all changing then the music you know. It wasn't moonlight and roses all the time it was rock and roll and Elvis and Bill Haley and all that sort of thing. I used to buy those and I've still got some of them.

33:38 So you said there were about eight of you, women there. Were you all about the same age?

At one time there were three of us. We were all the same age and I spoke to one of them the other day and we all tried to keep in touch. We were all about 17 and um there was another

girl there about our age but you know I don't know what happened to her because we just lost contact, but that's when I started smoking because in those days the majority of people smoked and I know lots of people who said they started smoking when they started work. You know you go in with a group of people and someone says ooh try one of these.

So where did you used to smoke did you used to smoke in work?

Yes in work. You couldn't smoke when you were doing the analysis because you had these blooming rubber gloves on, but if you were sat say you had 15 minutes half an hour or something where you were waiting for something else to come in, you could sit down and have a smoke.

So you could smoke in the lab then?

Well we used to smoke in the balance room where that pictures taken, where there were balances with a couple of little furnaces and oh go into the girls changing room and sit there and have a smoke, but people used to smoke anywhere then.

Did all the girls smoke?

I don't think they all did no.

But lots of you did?

Yes and the boys, yes. You would be an odd one out if you didn't smoke then. Yes, because we often you know say this especially people who used to smoke. We were in the majority when we first started smoking and now of course you're a social pariah if you smoke, but there we go I stopped a long time ago now.

You said you earned £5 a week, do you remember when that was?

Was it when I was 18? Well I think it was I was 21 and I was working down the distillers then I think. Yes I was. It must have been oh I can't remember it was between the age of 17 and 21.

Were there any unions in the works?

No and actually that was always a bit of a bone of contention because a couple of times men tried to set up a union and they were sacked.

So no union at all in the whole works not just the lab?

No not then. What it was like um when it closed down when it was Allied Steel and Wire I don't know but when I was there was no union.

Were there any disputes then? I mean what did people do if there were disputes?

Well I don't think we had any in the lab and I must admit that the chap who was the senior chemist there, well I think he was more of a metallurgist more than a chemist, he was quite an easy going chap and I must be honest he always favoured the females, his girls. He was a bit of an old fashioned gent because he um, I mean if we had a couple of times you know a bit of spare time, I know that one day somebody was talking about ballroom dancing and about some actual dance, so one of the other girls said how do you do that? So the two of them now doing this sort of like a tango. So she bent the one over backwards and they nearly hit the deck and as this happened the boss walked in and he said are you alright girls? He was just very concerned about them and his two daughters used to come and work there in the summer holidays as well. They were nice girls. Great fun.

38:26 How did you feel at the time about there not being a union there.

I used to think that was very unfair and it was bad but you know that's just the way it was and so people accepted it. You know there may have been problems out on the factory floor, no doubt there were but it didn't really bother us and I think perhaps at 17 and 18 you're not too worried about that.

What were the conditions there do you think looking back? You said it was very hot, what about the lighting?

That was, I think that was strip lighting you know I've got one in my kitchen. As far as I can remember that's what we used, I can never remember the name of those lights.

So that was pretty good then?

Yes, so there was plenty of light there. Yes, you had to be able to see to write things and to weigh things and to see the balances because in that balance room there were lots of big windows so that there was plenty of light in there and out in the lab where we did all the work.

So you say it was hot. Was it cold in any place then was it really cold anywhere?

Not upstairs, not where we worked no it was usually hot, yes.

Even though there were big windows?

Well you never used to open the windows because they were old swing balances any light draft would affect it.

What about ventilation then was there any ventilation?

Not as far as I remember. You know the extractor fans over the hot plates that's all I remember.

Do you think you've suffered any ill effects from being there apart from the dermatitis?

I don't think so and I've worked in other labs as well. Down at Distillers down in Barry and then I worked in the Ministry of Agriculture for 21 years and um you know, touch wood I think I'm alright. Seem to be. As far as I know I'm alright.

So what were the facilities like you know, apart from you had an ok canteen and how would you describe the facilities, toilets and stuff like that?

There was one toilet for us girls that was all. Yes, there was a foot bath there. I don't think anybody used it and that was it. Um, you know there was a cloakroom to hang your coats onto things but that was all but sometimes we used to work in the lab when the factory stopped for a fortnight and um we'd clean everything. We'd go down in the basement cleaning and all this and we used to be black afterwards and the boss arranged for us to go over and use the men's showers over by the nail factory, so a group of us girls were going over but we had to take a chap with us because the door didn't lock. So he stood guard outside the door when we were all in using the shower. Because he was a bit of a card he was saying are you alright girls? Do you want me to come and scrub your back? But I mean there were no other things there really.

42:39 So did you feel that the facilities weren't good at the time?

No I didn't because you didn't know any different. You know it was the first lab I'd been in and probably the first lab most of the other people had been in.

But did you think that it was strange that the men had showers but the women didn't?

Oh it was the men out on the factory floor. It wasn't you know the chaps that worked in the lab. They didn't have showers, but the thought of this now, the amusing thing was the boss had his own toilet, his executive toilet and it was a few steps up from the lab and I suppose it was tidy because very often people have said oh go upstairs to use his toilet if he was there. But you know there was nothing like showers if you got dirty or anything like that and when the weather was very hot, if it was nice hot, sunny weather some of us used to go up on the roof. It was a flat roof and sunbathe and it was black up there. It was as black as the ace of spades because of all the muck from the steel works because of the factories and we used to stretch on these old overalls trying to get a sun tan. We must have been mad.

What about the relationship between the women and the men? How would you describe that?

I think it was fine. A lot depended on personalities. You know some people were less popular than others but you know we usually all got on alright.

Was there any harassment either way?

No, well I can only remember there was a chap worked there and he was like an odd job man and he came up and the girls would say stay away from him, stay away from him and he came up once and put his arms around me so I stuck my elbow in his stomach. I didn't think about it it was automatic it came straight back.

45:16 What about the girls and the men did they used to harass the men? That's what I mean by either way.

Oh.

Did they used to...?

Yes and pull their leg and things like that but do you mean being officious and perhaps sexual harassment?

Yes sexual, crude comments that kind of thing.

No and you see nobody used bad language in those days and to be honest if anybody, I think if any of the men were making a nuisance of themselves and the girls had gone to the boss there would have been ructions I think. Yes, I didn't actually come across anything only this one chap that they said keep away from him.

So it was quite a pleasant atmosphere?

Yes.

What about holidays then, how many?

Two weeks a year.

Paid?

Yes.

Could you take them at any time?

Well yes you could because they used to have stopped fortnights at the factory but if you chose to go in to work you could and you ended up cleaning everywhere. So as long as it

didn't sort of clash with anybody else. So it was quite good but there was only the 2 weeks that you had then.

But the factory did sort of close down for?

Yes, yes.

Were you aware, what about the factory workers did they have to take the time off?

Yes, yes they closed the place down. You know like the nail factory would close, the rod mill and all the rest of, I can't remember what they all were but no that used to close down.

And Bank Holiday, did you have paid bank holidays?

Yes, but we always worked Good Friday.

Good Friday isn't a Bank Holiday.

Ah, but the bank closes doesn't it?

Yes but it's not an official.

This was back in the 50's.

But it's still not an official Bank Holiday.

Right, ah. Because there wouldn't be many buses then and I can remember I used to catch a very early bus from Fairwater and get to town and it would be something like three quarters of an hour an hour wait for the works bus so I used to walk. Lots of people did. We'd walk, all down Tyndall Street, Eastmoors Road and I think about it now and I think we must have been mad.

How long did it take you to get to work?

On the bus?

Yes.

When did you leave in the morning?

Yes, did I have to; I'm trying to remember which bus I used to catch. I probably used to catch one about seven minutes to eight. There was always a bus at seven minutes to eight and they used it for years, I think when I was in school as well and um you'd get into Cardiff by the central station there and the thing was you didn't want to miss the works bus and that

was about twenty to nine and I think there was another one then at quarter to nine. City buses you know just the double-deckers and I think there was a conductor on them and also somebody from the company would be on, you know would be standing there with the bus conductor. Making sure that everybody was behaving.

49:31 So it took you a while to get to work then?

Yes yes. Same as I suppose things are today. It takes longer if you have to wait, you know if you have to catch a couple of different buses or trains and you've got to wait in between so then it does take a bit longer.

You said your friend worked in the office. How many people worked in the office do you know?

There were quite a lot there because they had quite a few different divisions. I mean she would know because she used to do the wages because um they had a sales um section. They had another section that there were girls there that did the punch cards and there would be a typing pool and there was a drawing office you know and I think probably like lots of factories that were manufacturing to sell. They would probably have like the same departments but um there were quite a lot of people worked there.

0:50 So what about the factory floor, were you aware - did any women work on the factory floor?

I don't think so. I never came across any no.

Was that really heavy work on the floor?

I think it may have been yes and um yes I can remember walking past one of the buildings and I can't remember what it was called. Whether it was called roll mill or something like this and I saw this sort of steel coming out of the little furnace, whatever it was coming from and it was sort of big thick rods and that was going straight not like on a curved track like the other one where I saw it come off but it did look pretty heavy work.

Where did you see it come off again?

Oh just walking past. Oh when it came off oh that was over in Tremorfa works which was also part of Guest Keen and Nettlefolds. I think that was the rod mill.

Why had you gone over there?

Oh they just thought they would show us um you know that we'd probably analyse some steel that they were producing there and they just thought that they would you know take some of

us over so that we could see how the other half was living really. That was interesting I must admit and frightening.

Yes, can you describe the work the first time you saw it?

Well mostly what I saw I didn't actually get out into where the men worked because you know the office buildings looked quite nice and there were about 4 separate blocks of offices when I went there and they weren't sort of old you know like the old sort of stone buildings. They were just 2 floors they weren't tall buildings but that all looked tidy and you walked across the yard and the yard was tarmaced that was fine and then you walked a bit further on, that was where you started crossing the railway lines and that was when you got a bit closer to where all the business end went on. There were 2 labs. There was the one I was in, was the control lab but there was also a fuel lab next door and they were more or less the same sort of buildings. They were just like a square and they were 2 storeys with flat roofs, but um I did go in the fuel lab once or twice but not to work you know. I just knew somebody to chat there who was in tech where I was we were doing the same course.

54:06 What was it like then on the factory floor inside those big sheds?

It looked dark and dirty.

Tell me about when the rods came off because I think you told me about that.

Yes sorry, I don't know where it came from but this rod and it was not a thick rod you know not sort of 2 inches diameter or anything like that and it came shooting out and it travelled quite fast on a track and the steel was red hot and when we were up in the control room this one rod came off the track and just went snaking across the factory floor and everybody just jumped out of the way because you couldn't do anything else. That was frightening, I only saw that once. That was enough but chaps talk about it happening. You know some nasty accidents I think but I can't remember what.

Social life, were there any social activities organised by the workers?

Yes there was a sports club at Nettlefolds and I think it was shared with the big steel works that was alongside Sanctuar Street that ran parallel to that and they had a lovely sports club down on Sloper Road and they had quite a bit of ground with it and you know football pitches and all the rest of it and we often went down there and we'd challenge another department to play skittles so you know we'd just go down and play skittles and things like that and it was a very nice club. But there are houses built there now anyway.

So did you go there quite often?

No I think the only time I went there was when we had a little challenge skittles match that's all.

Did it have a bar and things?

Yes, yes.

What about Christmas activities, Christmas parties and stuff like that?

They were literally famous. They used to have staff dances and dinners and dance down at Bindles down in Barry but they also used to have, I think they had a couple; they used to have some things in the Royal Hotel in Cardiff. The meals were always awful but the dancing was ok and the last day that we worked you know and perhaps we'd finish work at twelve it might be Christmas Eve and we always had a party in the lab because by the time we came out all the buses had gone so we used to hitch hike but there would be a big group of us and you know lots of lorries going past and we got into the back of an egg lorry one day but there were a big group of us you know. It wasn't like hitchhiking on your own.

So I mean these dinner dances were they always Christmas dos were they?

Yes, yes.

Were they attended by workers or workers and their families or partners or whatever?

Yes there was always um you know a difference between the workers and the staff. The girls that worked upstairs in the lab we were staff and most of the men who worked downstairs were works so they would have separate dos for staff than the workers. They always had separate evening dos and of course the works ones would be much bigger because there were much more men working out there and I assume they took their wives.

58:39 Did the staff look down on the workers or were you aware of any kind of social hierarchy?

I don't think so you know I didn't feel that way because you'd have some of the men from the factory floor coming up for something or other because lots of the chaps who worked downstairs preparing all the samples, they were works you know they weren't staff and you got to know them, say good morning and have a little chat. So I didn't feel that way we used to go in the workers' canteen sometimes. I think it was if we worked on a weekend or something had gone wrong. Because the staff canteen wouldn't be open.

Where was the segregation then do you think? Was it just because of numbers maybe?

Yes I mean using different buildings may have been because of the workmen in their dirty overalls and then the sort of specially, lots of the young ladies who worked in the offices, they would be very smart and so the work's canteen was not really, left a lot to be desired

shall we say? But I mean we used to use it if we were there on weekends because we could go in and have some chips or what not just something to eat.

How long did you work there?

Five years altogether.

What did you do afterwards?

I had a break in between I went down to Distillers for a couple of years down in Barry which is BP now.

Oh right.

They made PVC and resins and things like that.

How did that compare to GKN?

Oh it was a lot different because the lab I was in there was not a control lab.

So tell me what the difference is then.

Control lab is you just checking everything that's been made to make sure it's up to specification whereas when I went to work in Distillers they were making PVC and we would test to see if we could get it to be useful for some sort of purpose. You know a company would get in touch with somebody and say look could you try doing this and I can remember doing something with some product I can't remember what and what it did it waterproofed something so that it looked a bit like one of these yellow oil skins and then we tested PVC to use as records you know disks and there was actually a machine there that would press a disk make it and I had one and I played it for years.

On PVC?

Yes yes and things like that so it wasn't so mucky and dirty. There were lots more labs there as well. There were a lot of labs there.

Were there a lot of women working there?

Yes.

And was it the same kind of - what place did you prefer really?

I think I preferred the steel works because I preferred the work. I think because I prefer to have a structure and something that told me what I had to do. Rather than sort of think well I'll try this or I'll try that. I'm not very good at that so I preferred that work.

62:50 What about the camaraderie and the social life, did you make friends down there as well?

Yes and um I mean of course it was in Barry so I know quite a lot of people in Barry as well and there were some real characters worked there. There are always characters wherever you work.

What about the wages down in the Distillers? What year are we talking about here now?

What year did I go there I was 19 or 20, so it was 1960-61 something like that and the wages were a bit better. They paid more and then they put us onto monthly pay.

That was posh.

Yes, that absolutely floored me. I expect lots of others were the same because you get paid for a month and you think gosh I'm rich and for a whole week you have a wonderful time and then you can't afford to go out and I can remember my mother found it difficult and she said to me at the end she said I'm sorry but you'll have to give me money weekly I can't cope with it monthly because she was always used to handling money weekly. So that's what I did and I still actually budget weekly now yes.

How did you get down to Barry?

I went on the bus and then I used to get a lift then with a chap who lived on Pencisely Road. I used to catch a bus down to Pencisely Road and I was there in 1963 in the bad winter and it was strange because we got to work and people from Barry couldn't get in and we always used to say oh well Barry is like Rome built on seven hills, but you know everywhere you go in Barry there's a hill so they couldn't get there.

So how long were you there for?

Two years I think. I went back to the steel works then for a couple of years.

What was that like going back there?

There were different people there. It was ok but you know lots of the people who had been there when I had worked there before had gone and there was some people there a bit more difficult, but never mind. Then I went to The ministry of Agriculture.

What was that like?

I loved it, it was good. Yes that was lab work as well. That was analysing agricultural materials, soil and feed for sheep and cows and hay you know lots of different things. It was only a small place.

Where was that?

In Llanishen. You know where the tax offices are? It was on the site there when the whole area was single storey buildings and I did enjoy it there and I was there for 21 years and then they closed.

66:23 Are you in contact with any of your workmates from the factories?

Yes I um spoke to one the other day and you know I met her for coffee not so long ago and there's another one. You know the three of us were all the same age and we were sort of very friendly and I've seen the other one as well and then I spoke to my friend the other night, the one in staff wages.

The one who got you the job?

Yes, yes the one that told me about it yes, because we were talking about some of the chaps that worked downstairs and you know she was saying that there was one chap who she hasn't seen for a long time and she used to see him regularly in Ely I think. She lives over in Ely now and we were just chatting and laughing about the different things that used to go on.

What about your friends, workmates from Barry do you see them?

Well my best friend you know we became very close friends but she died about 20 years ago now. But I do see her husband I go down to see him and see her boys. Well they're not boys they're men now and so I keep in touch with them. But I don't see anybody else from Distillers now. I used to when my pal was single because we used to spend a lot of time down in Barry you know, on the beach in the summer and going to parties and things like that.

Looking back how do you feel about the time you spent working in GKN especially?

I do sometimes think to myself I did the wrong thing because I managed to do ordinary national certificate in Chemistry but when I went on to do the higher national certificate I thought oh this isn't making sense anymore and I do think I might have been better off doing something else, like working in a bank or something like that with figures. Because when I moved over to the Welsh Office I ended up working in finance for about the last 10 years and I enjoyed that. You know I still would have been better with figure work than any of the other work.

Do you think that in a way you were better at Maths than Chemistry then?

Yes perhaps yes. Unless, because the thing is when I got to work in the Welsh Office I was 45 I think and the way that civil service works writing submissions for ministers and that sort of thing, I had never done anything like that and it really floored me. I must admit I couldn't get on with that and so I was happier doing finance with figures because you're either right or your wrong and when you're writing submissions and all this sort of thing its very often how people interpret things and sometimes I would think this is a waste of time but um I was ok once I worked in finance. I was ok, I enjoyed that.

Right I think that's it. So when you worked in Distillers yes.

Yes at Christmas time people would go out and have a drink and there was a pub up the road in Sully and the young ones from this lab all went up to the pub and when they came back they were riding the horses from the field opposite so they weren't allowed out again. Oh dear that was quite funny that was. But really when you hear about some of the things that go on today you think well, we all thought we were really daring but perhaps we weren't so daring after all.

71:08

END OF INTERVIEW/DIWEDD CYFWELIAD