

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI

Silhouette Underwear, Cardiff

Interviewee: VSE048 Mrs Mary Brice
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Interviewer: Rosemary Scadden on behalf of Women's Archive of Wales

00.19 *We can start with your name?*
My surname as well?

Yes, yes
Mary Brice

Where are you living now? You don't have to give me your full address, just the town.
Cardiff

Are you happy to tell me your date of birth?
2nd of the 8th 1931

Tell me a bit about your background, where you went to school.
My father was a builder and I went to school at St David's, in the centre, in the city.

Did you have many brothers and sisters?
I had eight brothers.

Were you the only girl?
Yes.

Where did you come in the family?
One before the last. I Must have been seventh, eighth. Eighth.

1.03 *Lucky you weren't the eldest, otherwise you would have had to do all the hard work, wouldn't you? So you went to St David's. Was that a primary school, or secondary school, or secondary modern?*
It was primary.

And what did you do when you left the primary school?

In those times, you left when you were fourteen.

So you were in that school for the whole of your education?

Yes

You said you were fourteen. What did you feel about leaving school?

At the time my parents were parted. My mother needed money and I had to go and earn some.

So what was your first job?

I worked in the Dutch Café in Queens Street.

Oh I remember with those big black and white tiles.

And those Dutch pictures on the walls. I was the cashier.

Even at fourteen! You must have been bright.

Well he did give me the sack because he said I looked too young to be in the cash desk.

He knew that before he employed you! So what sort of sobs did you have after that?

I worked in David Morgan's, the same sort of situation, as cashier, for some time, only months I think. From there I went to work in Sherman's.

The pools?

Yes. But not the pools, in the racing section. Not that it makes any difference, but yes that's the company. I was there for quite some time and then I moved from there to the Welsh Mills that used to be opposite David Morgan's. It was called the Esmeralda, but it was Welsh Mills originally. I worked in the office there. And from there I went to, oh I got married then at that time. I was home with my children for the first ten years, then I went back to work.

3.15 *So all these jobs you had, they were all in the same area in as much as you dealt with money and numbers and figures and finance.*

Yes

Did you excel at that in school, you were good at sums?

Yes, I was good at arithmetic.

So your first job after your children?

I worked in a temporary position in Guest Keens, doing wages. I was working for an agency, so I was moved about, you know.

Yes I've done that and you never know where you're going to be.

No, no. I was doing office work in a laundry one time. You know, they were only short spells and I wasn't fussed on that. Then when did I start work then, I must have gone to Silhouette then.

Where was the Silhouette factory?

In East Canal Wharf, no sorry West Canal Wharf. The one with the Custom House on the corner.

Was it a big factory?

Oh it was quite big, yes.

How many did they employ?

Oh, I don't know, about 250.

And it's virtually in the centre of town, isn't it?

Yes that's right. Yes.

So what did you do, what department did you work in?

Oh I worked in wages.

Wages again. Did you have much to do with the factory girls themselves?

Well, I mean they were back and forth, for various reasons to talk about their wages. Factory people, I don't know if you've ever worked in a factory, but they're very sociable, you know. Anything that was going on, like they would invite you to join them. The girls there like worked on a production belt so there were four belts with all the girls working, doing various parts of whatever garment they were making.

5.36 *Yes. We'd better say what Silhouette did.*

They made lingerie and swim wear. The head office was in Shrewsbury. They had a separate room where the garments were cut out, then they worked their way around the belt where the girls were doing different operations, because they were on piecework. So they all had little books and they'd write down what work they'd done and then they'd give me the books. All the books had to be made up to make their wages.

Were they paid weekly?

They were paid weekly.

It never stopped for you did it? It was always

I liked the work.

All those little sums you had to do for every person! Did you know anyone else who worked there already? Was there a family member there?

No.

What sort of qualifications did you have to get the job?

Only that I had had experience.

6.45 *The history of your working life spoke for itself, didn't it, really?*

So some of these questions don't actually fit your circumstances because your first day at work, though you might remember it when you left school. Do you remember the first day you went to work?

Well I went to the Dutch Café, because I already know somebody, my next door neighbour worked in the Dutch Café. She didn't get me the job, but I knew about the job through her.

So where were you living at that time?

Opposite Queen's Street station.

So you were in the centre as well? So it was only round the corner, wasn't it?

Just up the street.

Yes, yes. Excellent. It must have been quite an experience because it was a very elegant café, wasn't it?

Yes it was. Yes it was an experience. There were two older women in the office, when I worked upstairs and I was the youngest one. At the time they would keep talking to each other and you weren't invited to join the conversation you know. You were young and you didn't matter.

8.13 *And you were young weren't you, at fourteen?*

I was yes, yes.

So let's go back to the Silhouette factory. I don't suppose you wore a uniform; did the girls have to wear a uniform?

Yes they had just overalls, ordinary, button-up, like a coat.

Did they have to be any particular colour or just an overall?

Well I remember being in like a sort of, not quite dark, but a shade lighter, green. But they weren't all dressed the same, they had them in various colours. But they did have the green.

What sort of hours did you work and what sort of hours did the factory girls work?

Well the factory girls worked the same hours as me. We worked half past eight to five o'clock.

Five days a week or six?

No, only five days a week.

Were they all women on the floor?

They were all women but there were some men, sort of attached to the factory, like drivers taking the goods back to the head office and delivering goods in various parts of town, because they served David Morgan's and Howells.

Direct?

Yes that's right. There may have been other big stores but I didn't have anything to do really with that side. Those were the only men that I know.

They must have had mechanics perhaps or. . . ?

There was sort of a man that was a kind of all-rounder, you know.

To fix the machines.

Yes, not exactly a mechanic.

No, but a maintenance man.

Yes, yes.

These women in the factory, they were very sociable. Was there a social club attached to it?

No there wasn't a club, no. But they would have various celebrations like if it was somebody's birthday or events like that. If they did things, they would all go out to a club or a café or whatever, they'd say, 'Are you coming?'

10.13 *Yes, yes. The Top Rank, was that open then in Queens Street?*

I don't think so because I remember my own daughter's going there, so I don't think so.

Yes, that was a bit later, yes. I was just wondering where they went in Cardiff.
We went . . . we had a big celebration non one occasion. We went to Barry Memorial Hall. I don't know what the event was, I can't remember, but I know I went with one of my daughters and her boyfriend. Mind she was young, they were both young and there was a dance and a buffet kind of thing.

So they were all skilled jobs were they, on the floor?
No, not all skilled. But I mean there were some very experienced, but there were also some learning and being taught by others.

And you were a working mother. Did the company you worked for, did they make any allowances for that?
No.

And so for the other girls too, there wasn't a crèche there or any child facilities, minding facilities?
No.

No. They weren't interested I suppose.
They used to have a nurse that looked after the staff. The nurse, you know, you could go with, what can I say . . . theoretical problems, a romance had broken down, that type of thing. Also if they were injured in any way, through the machines or anything. You know the belt or something caught on, something like that.

11.57 *That was interesting that they were allowed to discuss personal problems as well with the nurse, as well as industrial accidents. Was it dangerous work at all?*
Well not really, but there's always something that happens somewhere. Someone gets their finger in the way and they get cut. You know minor stuff. Nothing great.

Did they encourage you to get qualifications at all?
No. They weren't interested in you as a person. No. As long as you done your job.

What sort of wages did the girls get? What year, what are we talking about? What period?
About 1967, '68, '69.

So these girls you said were paid piece work.
Yes they were paid piece work.

They must have been a basic rate.
There was a basic wage and then the piece work came on top.

Did the basic wage change with the age of the person or anything like that?
No, No. I'm just trying to think. Some wages were paid differently, because the people that were cutting the garments out, they were paid completely different to the people on the shop floor, you know.

The sewers, the machinists?
Yes.

13.49 *I see. So what did you do with your money?*

Put into my housekeeping, yes!

Yes, by the time you were a mother with children, you went to work because you needed to go.

Yes, exactly.

It just vanished into the general pot. Was there a union in the factory?

Yes, I think there was, yes.

Do you remember any trouble or which union?

No, I don't remember there being any trouble, but it was something like the *Something and Garments Union*

Cutters? Was it Cutters and Garments

It was *Something and Garments*. I remember that. Probably was, you're probably right.

Did the union reps discuss problems with the management? Were the management sympathetic?

Well, everything that happened in that respect had to be discussed by people in Shrewsbury. And then the whole thing in Cardiff was governed by the rules were in Shrewsbury. So I can't remember there being any discussions with union representatives, you know in discussions at all. There may have been, but I don't think so.

14.59 *Do you think the workers were treated fairly?*

Oh, I think they done quite well. Those that really worked hard and had the job in hand could earn quite a lot of money. Because you always get the ones who want to play about sort of thing.

Yes they don't really want to go to work at all.

No.

No. No. So you think that there was a good atmosphere with the supervisors and the management?

Oh yes, yes I do yes. I know one girl, one time became pregnant and she wasn't married, but she became pregnant. All thither girls provided everything she needed for the baby, before the baby even got there. Cots and prams and clothing and bed clothes. Everything she could possibly need.

How wonderful.

They did have a wonderful spirit between them, more so than office workers, I must say. They wouldn't do that, office workers wouldn't do that. They might give a personal present, but they wouldn't look after them the way that girl was looked after.

16.08 *That's an interesting observation, because where you were you could see both sides, couldn't you? A different position from most people. So Silhouette had a good reputation.*

Yes they did, they did.

You didn't wear a uniform because you were in the office, so I've asked you about that. Did they play them any music while they worked?

Yes they did play music.

Did they have entertainers in at all?

Oh no!

I was thinking of 'Workers' Playtime', do you remember that used to . . . ? They used to do that directly from a factory, didn't they?

Yes.

Were there night shifts there at all?

No.

What sort of breaks did they have in their working day?

I was thinking last night. I don't remember anyone having a break for coffee, in the morning any time. And there was no canteen, so lunchtime they would be all up around the streets around the area, and in the pubs. But they would be around the area, you know. All eating and drinking, during the break for lunch.

So they left the building?

Yes.

So there wouldn't have been a break for the afternoon. A tea break, so just the one. Were they very strict about them leaving their machines to go to the toilet, and that sort of thing?

Well the only thing is if they went to the toilet too often they lost out on their money. Because as the belt moves round, you know they've lost the production.

17.47 *Yes. So it wasn't sensible to play around.*

No. It wasn't in their own interests.

No. No. What about their annual holidays? By the sixties I suppose they all had holidays with pay?

Yes they did have holidays with pay. Yes it was a fortnight holiday, you know. And of course they had the Bank holidays that they were paid for, but other than that no.

Basic rate I suppose too, for holidays.

Oh yes, yes.

Were they good about letting you off, time off for personal events? Perhaps like a funeral, or something like that?

Well I think that if they thought the person was close enough to you, yes. But other than that, you couldn't stretch the point.

Yes because people do take advantage, don't they?

They do.

Would it be paid leave then?

Well it depended on how they rated you. If they thought you were generally a good worker and you were generally there, yes it would be paid. But it was subject to the management whether or not you were.

19.00 *I suppose if your mother died and you'd been a good worker then they would.*

Yes, that's right exactly.

But if it was your great aunty and you weren't much good....No! Fair enough, yes.
So where were you living when you lived at Silhouette?
I lived in Llanrumney

How did you get to work?
On the bus.

How long would you say that took?
About thirty minutes, I suppose.

It wasn't a special bus, was it, just the corporation bus?
Oh no. They did have special buses, but they used to pick up a lot of the workers from Barry. And they did have a special bus that picked up all the way along from Barry, at various points. So a number of the girls came from down that way.

That's interesting. And it was the same to go home of course.
Yes.

So you've just told me that.. .So you had to organise your life before you left in the morning. The children . . How many children did you have?
Four.

Oh my goodness, so you had lots to sort out before you went to work.
Oh yes, yes

You went to work for a rest, did you? So you had activities organised by the factory. Didn't you? So were they organised by the management or the staff?
Oh the staff.

20.30 *Christmas dance and that kind of thing. Did they lay on anything like a Father Christmas for the children or that sort of thing?*

No, no they didn't. What they did do they gave boxes of chocolates to the workers. It was organised through me, like different groups of staff. I had to buy the chocolates in a wholesaler and sort out. They did have some sort of scale; like the better ones went to the people who had worked there the longer, been there the longest and it worked its way down, you know.

That was a nice thing to do, yes. Did you enjoy working there?
Oh yes I did.

Because you had so many other jobs, was it your favourite place?
No, I don't think so because since then, which has nothing to do with that, but since then I worked for the Electricity Board. I worked in a few jobs but I did work in the foundry in the village. That was alright, but then there was a job going in the Electricity Board and the wages were twice what I was earning, so I decided right I'll give it a go. I didn't expect to get the job to be honest, because most of the people were better educated than me. But I suppose they took the view of experience and I was there for eighteen years.

21.59 *So how long were you at Silhouette?*

I was talking to my daughter this morning. I think I was there for about four years. Yes, about four years.

Did you keep in touch with any of the people that you met?

Well not exactly in touch, but like I know where some of them are now and I could mention to you if you wanted to interview them. I don't know that there's one in Rumney village and she was one of the best workers at the factory and she lives, I don't know the name of the street, but I can explain it to you if you wanted to go there. And one of the others that was the trainee at the time, she's been a manageress in Boot's for quite some years now. They move her about to different districts. Wherever she goes, she's the manageress.

So they were a good calibre of girls who worked there. Was it something that girls would want to do. 'Oh I want to work in Silhouette, rather than work in Freeman's, for instance. Was there competition between these Cardiff factories, like that?

Well, not that I heard off, but I think some of them had more of a feeling for sewing, you know. They were probably good at school or something and wanted to do that type of work. I don't say all of them but some felt like that I would say, because they could produce the stuff very quickly and make a good job of it.

23.28 *They had an aptitude. There are so many different skills needed in all these different kinds of factories, aren't there?*

I don't know if you know it, but they all do a certain section. Like if they're making bras then one might be putting the shoulder straps on; one's putting the hooks at the back. They don't do the other work like. It comes along the line, half done, you know. Then they all do separate bits all the way along and then at the bottom of the line there's an examiner who examines the work and who either passes it or no. And if it is not right they will send it back to who's ever wrong with it and she's got to do it again. That's how it works.

So nobody makes a complete garment.

No, no. No one makes a complete garment. I don't say that they're not capable, probably some of them are because they've been through various stages, but that wasn't the usual thing. They all had their own job, that's why they were so good at what they did, because they were doing it repeatedly

24.31 *Yes, the management had probably worked it out that that was the most productive way rather than one girl putting everything together and just doing the elastic and do this. Yes, that's right.*

And the machine, of course, could be set for that task.

Yes, that's right. They did that. . . that enabled them to various work

Well in four years perhaps you didn't see any changes in the style of underwear that went on. Where did the designs come from, did you have a design office there or did that come from Shrewsbury?

No we didn't have a design office there.

Does the company still exist?

Well, I think it does, in Shrewsbury, but they closed down in Cardiff and they took everything back. I don't even think that the building is there now. The building at the time was quite modern. I think it had been warehouses, where it was because it was right on the edge of the river. And I think this building had been done over to a modern style, but inside it was quite a pleasant place, you know. It wasn't depressing.

25.46 *No. The company, who owned it? Do you know who they were? Were they British people or . .*

Oh, I think so. We never saw anyone from any other nationality there. There was like a small office next to my office, there was an office with a manager and under manager in there; and sometimes we'd get somebody important come from Shrewsbury to see if everything was going as it should. But in the office that I worked in, there was myself, there was two young women and then on the next side of it, they had something called stock control. They followed the cards. They had like a list of cards on the wall that follows the productions so that you know what stage everything is at. So there was a young girl that used to work at that.

That was long before the days of computers!

Oh yes, yes.

Now, did you pay the girls in cash?

Yes.

So you actually had to make up their wage packets every week?

Yes, yes.

27.00 *Did they get paid on a Friday?*

Yes a Friday, uh a Friday or Thursday um? No I get the feeling that it was Thursday. I don't think it was Friday, no.

And so you would pay them a week behind?

A week in hand, yes.

So they worked a week in hand so you had time to do all the arithmetic and get all money. Did you actually go out and get the money yourself from the bank?

No, I didn't personally, no. I've got a feeling the manager went or the under manager, but I didn't.

Then they presented you with all these bags of coins, because today nobody gets paid like that so let's talk a bit more about that, because that's different from what it used to be. Did you have security at all, around you?

Well the only security that I remember to do with wages at all was when I worked in the Electricity, was it the electricity, yes. Two people always went to the bank to draw the money and we were told if anybody does attack you, let them have the money, because they said we are covered by insurance anyway. You weren't supposed to put your life on the line.

28.40 *Do you remember when then change, you must have been at the Electricity Boar then when it went from weekly to straight into people's accounts and all that sort of thing?*

I was, yes. Because we used to put it up in cash in the Electricity board for the first couple of years, I don't know how many, but the first couple of years and then gradually it moved over, because people tended to mistrust that system, because they weren't accustomed to it. And of course they wanted the money in their hand. They felt that they hadn't earned anything, you know, but gradually they got more into it. And also if they had a complaint they'd think that if haven't got the money you can't say were short paid and here's another fiver or something, because you didn't have it. You didn't have money, but you could adjust it by, you know, advancing it next week or next month, depending how they were paid. Yes, but at the beginning, well there was a group of us in the Electricity, you can imagine, we had a big table

and there was about eight of us that used to all put the wages up, because one would be there for ever!

Yes, yes, a large staff, yes. It is something that we forget that it is all there in the bank and all invisible, isn't it? We don't even see money at all, like long ago, paying with plastic.

I think it lasted longer that way.

30.14 *What having real money?*

No, not having real money. I think real money was too quick. You know, you could give it away.

You mean easier to spend.

Yes. Now we have more time to think about it and say 'Do we really need it?' whatever that is.

Yes if it is hot in your purse it tends to jump out a bit quick! Yes it must have taken quite a number of years before people accepted it.

Oh yes, it did, yes. And then they'd go to the bank at the wrong time, especially the men in the Electricity. They'd go to the bank before you had chance to put the money in there long enough for them to be able to take it out. And things like that, you know.

And of course, years ago the banks weren't open easily, you know. They closed at half past three, it isn't until all this change happened that the banks had to be more user friendly too, didn't they?

Yes, that's right.

Open longer hours . .

And Saturday, some of them anyway.

Yes, there's been some big changes, haven't there?

Yes there has.

I suppose for hundreds of years people were paid in cash.

Yes I'm sure they did. I think if we're talking a long time ago, it was a case of bartering things.

31.39 Front door chimes. End of interview