

## VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI

### Curran's – Cardiff/ Caerdydd

**Interviewee:** VSE057 Iris Radley  
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**Interviewer:** Lauren Orme on behalf of the Women's Archive of Wales / Archif Menywod Cymru

*Could you say your name and date of birth?*

Okay. My name is Iris Radley and my date of birth i.e. 17th July 1940.

*Could you tell me a little bit about your background, where were you born and what did your mother and father do?*

I was born in London, in North London, but when I was a year old I came down to Cardiff so I have always thought of myself as a Cardiffian. My dad was a marine engineer, he was at sea for many years but by the time I came along he had given up the sea and he was working at Mount Stuart Dry Dock in Cardiff. My mother, because my dad was away at sea a lot before I came along, she carried on working, she wasn't really a typical housewife. She worked as a cashier and then in later years you also worked again first in a shop and then in as a cashier, because she was very good with arithmetic.

*Do you have any brothers or sisters?*

No, I was an only child. So no.

*Okay. Where did you go to school?*

Well, I went to school in Cardiff. I went to Lansdowne School, it was very big, infants and junior school and that was within walking distance of home. Then at 11 I went to Cardiff High School for Girls and I stayed there into the 6th form.

*Okay, so you left in 6th form?*

I left in the upper 6th, but I didn't actually complete my A Levels, I did them later.

*Why did you decide to leave then?*

Oh, a big hiatus between the headmistress and myself, and other girls in a similar position. I wanted to go to University and do Geography and she wanted me to go to teacher training college and be a junior teacher and I really didn't want that. So I left and I took a job, I had to pass an entrance exam in the foreign Office in London.

*Then you worked in the Foreign Office?*

Not for very long, I hated it. I absolutely loathed it. It was unbelievably boring and tedious and I had a very good social life in London I might add, but no I stuck it for less than a year. The best bit about it, I think, was day release up to Westminster College and carried on with the A Levels and

other subjects. So yeah I enjoyed that, and the thwaiters and cinemas and restaurants and all that, it was great fun... concerts... mmm [laughs].

*03:20 So that was your first job after leaving school?*

Yes

*Which factory did you work in then?*

Well, that was before leaving school. It was in Curran's Steels Which was a very well know enterprise down in the Grangetown area of Cardiff. It was actually where my dad had worked during the war, because he'd given up the sea, I'm not quite sure I think it was in the late '30s, and he was working on Mount Stuart Dry Dock but then during the war he had some specialised knowledge of... I've no idea what he actually did but he worked for the admiralty in Curran's Steels. When the war was over he went back to working in the Dry Dock. So when I was... I'd just had my 16th birthday and all my friends were getting summer holiday jobs and I thought "*Well, yes I should get one.*" so I toddled along to, what we now call the Job Centre, but they then called the Labour Exchange and I said "*I'm looking for Holiday work*", and they said Curran's Steels are looking for people in the holiday to cover, you know, employees who have gone on holiday. So I went home and my mother hit the roof, she was appalled, because my dad had always said that the girls who worked in Curran's Steels were common as muck, and she said "*Oh, I don't know what daddy will say when he comes home.*" But actually he was alright with it.

*So what year was that?*

That would have been the summer of 1956.

*How long did you work there?*

Oh, the whole of the summer. Probably about five weeks. So the whole of the school holidays.

*So did anyone else you know go and work there as well?*

No, nobody at all.

*Did you know anybody when you got there?*

Not a soul.

*So the factory made steel?*

Yeah. It wasn't a foundry, it didn't make steel starting from iron ore and starting from the basics. It had the iron and the steel came and they sort of made things from it. Primarily they made, the bit that I saw anyway, they made spare parts for tanks. It was really quite heavy industry.

*06:02 Do you know why they were taking people on other the summer?*

Well just to cover people who had gone on holiday I think.

*Did you have to have an interview or a reference or anything to work there?*

No, not really. The interview was really at the job centre and they just said "*Turn up Monday morning*", so I did.

*What was it like?*

Oh, it was a real shock to the system. First of all it was a very early start but luckily we had a very convenient bus so I was able to hop on a bus at about 6 O'clock in the morning. That was a shock to the system when you've been in school all your life. It was only a very short walk then from the Bus Station in Cardiff down to Curran's, it wasn't far at all. That was really quite convenient. Then, I'd been used to wearing school uniform and we put on overalls in school of cookery and chemistry but you had to wear an overall all day here so, I think they more or less came in small, medium and large and they'd say "*Here's your overall.*" and they said because its factory environment, for safety, you have got to wear a turban and they handed you this enormous square of material, cotton,

and they said *"Oh the girls will help you."* and the girls were brilliant I mean they really were, regardless of what my mother thought about them the girls were fantastic. You fold it like this, and so it became a triangle and you put it on round your head, just make sure you can still hear, tie it this way and you tuck it in that way and it looked awful, it looked absolutely awful I took one look in the mirror and thought *"Oh my god, I've got to wear this all day."* But everybody did, and some of the girls came from quite away, they came down from the Rhondda by buss and they would all put their hair up in curlers in the morning and then they would put their turban on before they came to work and they would spend all day in their turban then when they when home in the evening the turban came off and the curlers came out and they went out dancing or whatever they did with a nice hair do, I couldn't be bothered with that.

*So what was the factory floor like?*

I was big and it was busy and it was literally an concrete floor and there were lathes and all sorts of equipment that you needed training for and skill. They had to give me a job which required the minimum skill and training if they were going to get their monies worth. So I was given a job which involved checking the straightness of tank tracks. The tracking that goes around the wheels, if you like, of a tank. Its got rods, they're I suppose about an inch in diameter and they're about... less than a meter long certainly. They would arrive in huge bundles, it was a sitting down job so it wasn't so bad, and you role them, these tracks, back and fore in a sort of cradle and where the needle came down, which was a sort of display on a gauge, if it was in certain perimeters it was okay you threw it in the big bin on the left and if it was out of true, if it wasn't totally straight you threw it in the other one. I went home felt really tired, the next day I could hardly feel my arms because they were really heavy, I mean these were steel, they weren't rods, they were substantial pieces of steel. So yes, it was quite physical even though it was a sitting down job.

*10:01 So what were your first impression of the other people working there?*

Oh, very friendly and very helpful. They had a repertoire of the dirtiest jokes I think I have ever heard in my life. We were, 't, in school, beyond passing a few jokes around, but some of these were just so crude but funny and they were very kind. I remember one girl came up to me on one occasion, she said "See that old man over there" and there was this really avuncular looking grey hair and little moustache, she said *"if he offers you a sweet, you be carful."* So I said *"Oh, yes?"* As a small child I had been told not to accept sweets from strangers but at 16 I thought this was a bit odd, and she said "Oh yes, because if you say *"no thank you"* he'll say *"would you like one for later"* he'll try and put it in your top pocket and touch you up." So I was duly warned, and as I say, this sweet looking old man, well he wasn't old you know he was probably 50. So they warned me about him and while I was there I had my O-Level results come through, which was very a very weird system in those days. You didn't go to school and get them, you weren't notified by post, well some people might have been, but we all had to buy the Western Mail and they were printed in the Western Mail. So on that particular day I bought my Western Mail at Cardiff Station, ran to Curran's so I shouldn't be late sat on the bench and opened it and I'd passed all but one of the subjects and I was so relieved I burst into tears and the all came up and put their arms round me saying *"Whats the matter?"*, *"Is everything alright?"* *"Is someone being mean to you?"*, and i said *"I passed all my exams."*, and they said *"Whats the matter with her?"*, *"Oh, she's passed her exams."* So yeah, they were lovely, they were great, they were full of fun and nearly all of them lived in the Rhondda, and they came down some by bus definitely maybe some by train. They told me, when we got talking, I said *"Well why do you want to come down here all the way down to Cardiff to a factory?"* and they said *"Well its better than going into service."* and that really surprised me because in the mid '50s I didn't think may girls went into service. But obviously that was still part of the thinking.

*13:04 So you were checking the steel rods were straight, it didn't require any skills. Did you have to ensure that the line was moving?*

Where I was working wasn't really a production line. It was just a sort of job in a corner, more or less. They did occasionally give me a break from it because the rod s that I had to check for align-

ment also had on the end two things like great big washers and both the rods and the washers had to be packed up. It was very very heavy duty... it was a cross between brown paper and grease proof paper and it has a bright green lining and you had to make up bundles of the rod and bubbles of the washers and pack them up. So that was a bit of a change. But nobody ever said "*Come on, get a move on. We need these.*" there was no real pressure that I remember at all. The other thing I had to do was varnish labels. Nearly all these spare parts for tanks went off to army stores or army centres where they maintained tanks, and I don't know how long this stuff stayed around, but the labels that said where they went, I remember one of them being Chilwell, and I had no idea where Chilwell was, but you had this pot of varnish and you had to varnish both sides and then attach the labels to the parcels. On one occasion they said I'd miss diagnosed one of these bars and it was wonky when actually it was straight and that was the only time I can remember anybody telling me off or keeping an eye on me. They just basically said "*Get on with it.*" [laughs]. I tell you one thing that was nice there; there was a guy who had been blind in the war and he operated a lathe, I don't exactly know what it was, but he could do it all by touch and he had a dog and he brought his guide dog with him everyday and the guide dog just sort of crashed out user his lathe. There was a time when one of the girls said "*The dog needs a bit of attention, he needs hid coat brushed or he needs to be cleaned up.*" and they went to the man operating the lathe and said "*Do you mind if we give the dog a little wash a brush up?*" and he said "*No, that would be lovely.*", "*We've noticed parts of him are looking a little bit grubby.*" They didn't give him a bath or anything but they gave him a sort of wash and brush up and I though that was nice. So there was enough slack, if you like, in the day that they could do this kind of thing.

*16:20 Can you describe an ordinary day there?*

Well, an ordinary day there was first of all getting up earlier than I'd ever used to to be doing. My mum used to give me a packed lunch. There was a canteen that you could go to but she always gave me little bits and pieces to take with me. Dash down to get he bus, get to the factory and then the first thing, obviously, was to put on your overalls and your turban and then at a set time everyone would leave the cloakroom where you just left your outdoor stuff. You just got on with it until they said it was break time. I mean if you needed to go to the loo or anything there was no sort of rigid time structure. I can't remember hearing or seeing any one being disciplined for time wasting or not being productive. I can't remember the exact finishing time, it might have been half past four. Then that was it, you know, go home. I enjoyed it and I enjoyed earning the money as well, it was peanuts, but I enjoyed it. I remember the first thing that happened was, come friday, the people from the payroll department arrived with like a large tray of brown envelopes and I thought "*Oh, yeah, pay!*" and they said, because nobody had explained this to be before, "*You won't get any this week*", and I was a bit taken aback, "*No, you're paid a week in hand.*", I'd never hear the expression before but they said, "*It means you get it next week.*" [laughs], "*Oh, right, fine.*" that was one of the little highlights of the day. Yes, there was now rigid structure it was just sit down, get on with it till lunch time. After lunch sit down and get on with it again.

*After that first day when you arms heart you so much, how did you cope with it after that?*

It sort of eased off a bit. I was a bit like going to the gym and over doing it on the lifting. I probably developed a few muscles I never knew I had, but you didn't go home shattered, you did go home quite tired but you didn't go home exhausted. I mean my friends and I used to cycle down to the beach afterward in the evening, we were young and fit then.

*So you didn't have to do a certain amount of work each day?*

Not that I was aware of. Nobody ever made me aware of targets or performance objectives or anything like that.

*Did it go by quite quickly, the day?*

No it was a bit tedious [laughs]. Here's another one, here's some more, then just a your getting to the end of that pile somebody would turn up with a huge pile more of rods. I must admit whenever I sees war films on the telly and when I see tanks going along I think "*The run on tracks and those*

*tracks are made of bars and those bars have got washers at the end.*” So I could sort of relate what I was doing to the purpose that they were being made for, even though they were very small parts. They did explain the context of what I was doing.

*Where you moved from the factory floor to do anything else, any other work?*

Only from within a very small area to do either packing or varnishing. That's all, no, I wasn't there long enough to really do anything more.

*Do you remember how much you got paid?*

Not really no. I think it was in the region of £2 a week but I mean we are talking 1956. No I can't remember any detail.

*20:15 Was it good holiday pay for a student?*

It was probably average compared to some of the things that my friends were doing. It wasn't ridiculously beneath the norm.

*Did you get paid the same as the other people that were working there?*

I've no idea, I didn't ask.

*Did the factory supply your overalls and things?*

Yes they did. But they didn't launder them so on Friday you had to bundle them up and take them home. They were quite greased because the rods and the washers, after they had been made, to stop them rusting they were dipped in grease and when you were working you wore really really heavy duty rubber gloves. At the end of the week your overall was quite mucky and I took it home and my mother early fainted and she said, *“The best best is just to soak this.”* and we soaked it and she did all the necessary and you turned up on Monday morning with your one overall, washed and pressed and ready to start again. Yeah... it was a bit basic.

*Did you use special equipment?*

Well, only this gauge thing that they had, which did look very very simple, it was very low tech.

*Was that supplied by the factory as well?*

Oh yes, it was built in. It would have been moved with great difficulty.

*Did you have to clock in and out?*

Yes. Oh yes. Again that was another new experience, but I knew about it because when my dad was in Curran's he had mentioned about clocking-in and clocking-out. I wasn't quite sure what it involved but yes, that was one of the reasons for sprinting from the bus to the factory to make sure, because you knew that would affect your wages.

*So what happened if you were late?*

You lost a quarter of an hour. The hour was just divided into four and if you were a minute past... there was probably a small parameter of give and take. But you knew once it had gone past that couple of minutes you lose a quarter of an hour's pay. Which mattered.

*Was it noisy?*

Very, yes. Yes. Yes it was extremely noisy. I don't think it was noisy to the point of damaging your hearing but yes there were people using machines, lathes and all sorts of moving stuff about the factory floor. So yeah.

*Was it hot or cold?*

I don't remember it being uncomfortably hot or cold. Because for one thing, these overalls were quite substantial, they were heavy duty cotton. It was summer so you would turn up in summer clothes you'd put this overall on... I don't remember it being uncomfortably hot or cold.

*Did you find the work boring or interesting?*

Unbelievably boring.

*How did everyone else cope with it?*

I don't know, because when work is really boring, you don't tend to talk about it very much. I just think that from when I spoke to the other girls what they felt was, they liked the fact that it started started at a set time it finished at a set time and then you went. It wasn't the kind of job where somebody would ask you to stay on and do a bit more, perhaps like working in a shop, or service was the one they compared it to mostly. Your hours might be extended because some particular spring cleaning or whatever that needed doing. Also, working in a big organisation there was a management structure of supervisors and managers and top bosses, executives. You dealt with a supervisor and he or she would deal with other girls there was a sort of team spirit. You did feel, as you would have in service, that you were working for one lady with whom you might not have got on very well. So I think they rather liked that, that was the feeling I got from them.

*25:20 Could you talk to each other on the factory floor?*

Not a lot on the factory floor because a lot of people were in one work position and didn't move about a lot. It was mostly before work, during lunch break that you got a chance to talk to them. I never got to know any of them terribly well.

*Was it too noisy to communicate while you were there?*

Well that was part of it, but the other thing was, I actually was very physically near any of the others, it might have been a good 10/12 feet away which in a fairly noisy environment isn't really conducive to chatting.

*Did anybody sing while they were working?*

Not that I am aware of.

*Did they tease you or play tricks on you?*

Never. No, no, they were lovely to me.

*There's a question here about telling blue jokes...*

Oh, plenty of that went on. Yeah, I just went along with it you know. It didn't bother me particularly.

*How did the men who worked there treat you?*

I wasn't aware of any particular sexism apart from that one old guy I was warned about, putting a sweet in your pocket. I wasn't aware of any sexism at all.

*So when you were talking about the other people that worked there being really nice, is that mainly women was it mixed?*

That had more to do with the girls than the men. Because I think maybe put girls on some type of work and put men on the heavier work. But I don't know if there was a policy on that or not.

*So did the men and women mix much at all?*

On the shop floor there was interaction in as much that stuff had to be moved from one place to another, there would be interruption then. It was mostly men who moved the stuff on sack trucks. I don't remember there being much in the way of fork lift trucks about. But yeah, there was some interaction primarily to do with completing work or delivering stuff to be worked on or taking away completed work. But it wasn't, sort of like, the interaction you get in an office.

*Do you remember how the women treated the men who worked there?*

Fine as far as I can recall. I don't remember anybody particularly, either flirting or being put out by them. I think because we came from a wide area they probably had all their social contacts back where they lived, primarily in the Rhondda Valleys. I don't think they were particularly interested in the men who worked in the factory, either social or any other way, just got on with them.

*Were there any perks or any unofficial perks from working in the factory?*

There was a subsidised canteen. The food in the canteen was good value and it was okay. That's the only one I can think of.

*Were there any rules and regulations?*

Only with regard to safety, that I'm aware of. I think they would have given you a funny look if you'd worn high heels but I don't remember being told not to. No, I think if anybody had really slacked off they would certainly have been disciplined but... I was only there a short period, I don't remember hearing of anybody being disciplined for either low productivity or inappropriate behaviour in any way.

*29:45 Did you join in any social events while you were there?*

No, no. I had my own social life [laughs]. It mostly involved cycling to the beach with friends and just going for a swim, so no. I don't think there was any, because as I say everybody when back. they might have been people that lived and worked in Cardiff, but for the most part they came down from the Valley every morning and back up in the evening. So their social life was up there.

*So overall did you enjoy working there?*

Yes. I've got very positive memories of it.

*Why did you enjoy it?*

I think it was the first time I had ever worked for money and I could spend it on whatever I wanted to. When I met my friends who also had holiday jobs we could compare notes. So that was fun. It gave me an insight into factory work and made me decide it was something I never ever wanted to do in my life again.

*So you wouldn't have wanted to stay there?*

Oh, absolutely not.

*Did you learn anything about life or society or the world of work while you were there?*

I suppose I did. I may not have realised it at the time but I think what you learn is that there are, in the work place, people who perhaps because they haven't got high skills or high educational qualifications will probably be stuck for their entire working life in dead end jobs. I think I learnt that.

*How would you sum up the experience?*

Oh, worthwhile. although it was very short I really think I did learn quite a lot.

*Great, thank you. That's everything.*

Great...

32:07

END OF INTERVIEW/ DIWEDD Y CYFWELIAD