

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/ LLEISIAU O LAWR Y FFATRI

St Margaret's garment factory, Bargoed

Interviewee: VSE066 Jill Baker

DOB: 19/12/37

Date: 18/6/14

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

Jill Baker was born at her grandmother's house. She says her maternal grandparents were from Walsall near Birmingham. They moved to South Wales just after 'they sunk the pits.' She talks of her aunty Millie going to school in Caersalem chapel in Aberbargoed and paying 1d a day. They then built the infants and the boys and girls schools. She says her father's mother was from Cardiff and had been in service. Her grandfather was from Newport. She says her father was an engineer in the pit. Her mother went to London when she was 14 and was in service for 2 years, but when she came back she never worked again.

02:56

Jill Baker says she was an only child. She says that when she was 10 she caught polio. She says she lost 2 years of school then because she was in hospital for 6 months and then had to learn to walk again. She says it affected her education. She can read but she can't spell. She says that it was because she had days off to go to the clinic and the hospital. She also had a problem with fractions although she could add and subtract. Yet she says that she 'did alright' and used to come 2nd 3rd or 4th in the class.

05:23

She says that she left school when she was 16. 'They' wanted her to try shorthand and typing. The headmaster wanted her to go to Crumlin College of Further Education to do S & T. But she didn't want to go because of having to sit a maths exam.

07:02

She says she went to the 'Job Centre' and tried for a job in the NCB offices. She didn't get that so she went to see the careers officer and they told her that they were taking people down in the factory, St Margaret's. They made clothes for Marks and Spencer. St Margaret's was a very good factory to work for and she knew someone who was a supervisor there. She said that she would explain Jill's situation to the management before she went for an interview. She was given the job and worked there for 10 years.

08:37

She says that she had to go for an interview. "The only thing I can remember about the interview was that they had little squares and so many beads and you had to put so many and try to make them all the same in little dishes - that's all I can remember about it."

09:15

She says that she got the job to work as a machinist. When asked if she was given training she says yes and it went on for 3 months. "You learnt to sew on paper first right, and then little bits of material and then gradually they'd learn you how to do darts and as you were improving you'd have work from downstairs because they knew those darts would be ok to go onto the line. You had to learn to make everything up completely.... a blouse completely from nothing. And when you did collars and cuffs they used to have canvass in them.. more tailored stuff. She says they were trained very well. She says they sent work up to them to do and the work was examined after they'd done it.

11:11

After they'd been taught they could see that they were good enough to make cuffs or darts. Everything was cut out for them but they had to make it up from nothing and then they were examined by the designer.

11:52

After 3 months they were put on a line. She thinks that about a hundred people worked in the factory on the blouses then there was another part on men's pyjamas and there was a liberty bodice section. She thinks about 400 people worked there altogether, mainly women. She talks about the different jobs.

13:15

JB says that she didn't use a sewing machine until she went to work in the factory. She was taught to use the sewing machine in the factory. When asked whether the machine was adapted because of her disability, she says that the mechanics adjusted the treadle for her. She explains what they did to her machine. She said that if she had to work somewhere else for 3 months, she'd take her machine with her. They would adjust the

machine to make sure it was ok for her. When asked whether they were accommodating she says "Yes - I didn't want anything else because I could do.." She talks about the work and what happened on the line. She says she had no problems with anything and that's the only thing she asked them to do.

15:15

When asked if she found the speed of work ok she says yes. You was paid... you had a basic wage and then they used to time you all day to see... to price each thing. Now collars for instance would be 2/6 a dozen . The darts... oh I didn't like darts... my friend's sister in law was fantastic - she'd finish.. she'd do 20,000 darts, 2 in the front, 1 in the back and two bust darts and she'd be going home at 3 o'clock, cos she was just quick!... Some were good at darts and some were good at collars. I was a collar girl and a zip girl. I've seen me do 10 dozen zips a day! If there's one thing I couldn't do... put sleeves in." She explains why.

"You'd have your blouse, you get your sleeve right and you'd have to put your sleeve into your blouse right, the wrong way, and you had a nick there and a nick there.. and of course you had to ease it in. My cousin she always did sleeves and she was good at it. She just had a flair. I have done them and they've been alright but they haven't been like they should really be."

18:56

When asked how much she was paid when training she says, £2.50 a week and it was the same after she finished training. She says that was about 10/- a day and they had to make sure you could earn 10/- and whatever that was over they would have as bonus. She says she could earn £10 a week but she had to do 20 dozen zips a day. She says that they had different size zips 6", 8" 10" 12" and 14" and the different sizes took different times to complete, the biggest taking more time. Sometimes an order like M&S would ask for the bigger sizes, and then they had to work harder to get a bonus. She asked if they could mix them a bit because it was harder and took longer to sew in a 14" zip, but the factory couldn't because M7S had asked for 14" zips only. She says though, that she found the factory OK to work for.

22:47

She says they saw the Time and motion people often because they worked there and were employed by the factory. She says they'd be there all day timing you, but she says that she found them quite fair.

23:35

"When the buyers (from M&S) used to come, they were spot on. They had their tape measures, they'd turn things it inside out... and of course they wanted the orders see. I found them alright... well everyone did really." She says that they only made clothes for M&S. She says she found the factory very fair. She says she could have gone to work at

Remploy but she said no, she preferred to work in St Margaret's. She says Remploy was in Blackwood and she says that they employed quite a few women.

25:58

She says that was the best thing she did was staying there. But when asked if she enjoyed the job, she says that she enjoyed the company but she hated sewing.

"I never liked sewing"

"And yet you did it for 10 years."

"Yes I did it for 10 years"

26:49

She says that when she first worked in St Margare'ts, she lived further up in Aberbargoed. She says there were always buses coming from Bargoed. She says that she caught the Public service bus. They started work at 8am. She says a lot of people walked. She says it was only 2 stops on the bus.

When asked about impressions of her first day, she says that she didn't have to go in until about 9 and she had to go through the office part and go upstairs. Her cousin's wife had just started there and she hadn't done any sewing either. They made them sew on brown paper first of all. She also remembers that they had three breaks in a day. She says it snowed on her first day.

JB says that the factory was nice. It was clean, the toilets were wonderful and there was a canteen. She says she used to eat in the canteen. The times of their breaks used to vary. She says they could have a cooked dinner. They could have hot dogs or corned beef pastie or toast.

She says that she knew people who worked there. She was in school with some of them. She says that some of them not many were rough and they swore, but she says that 'underneath' they were ok and if they were waiting for work they'd help her out.

32:14

She says that they'd go dancing now and again and every year they'd crown the beauty queen. They'd have a St Margaret's competition in Bargoed and in all the other factories - Leicester, Olham, Briggs etc. Sometimes the competition winner would go and compete in the main competition. There was also a newsletter. She says they were a very good firm to work for. She says she used to go out with the other women. They would often go to the pictures. She says there was a good camaraderie.

34:55

When asked if the firm arranged things for them she says that they had lovely Christmas dinners. She says that once they went to the Connaught Rooms in Cardiff. They could

take their husbands or boyfriends or not. Sometimes they'd go and see a show. She says that the Connaught Rooms was in St Mary's Street. She talks about the Kardomah. She says that they went on day trips as well like Weston on the boat and she says she went to Swansea once and spent the night in the Police Station.

36:28

She tells the story of going to Swansea on a trip, missing the bus home and spending a night in a Police cell waiting for her dad to come and pick her and her friend up. They went to see the Ten Commandments and when they came out the bus had gone.

46:50

When asked what she did with her wages, JB says that she gave all her money to her mother. He was given pocket money to buy her own nylons and to save some to go on holidays. She says she was earning good money so she asked her mother whether she could go on board and lodge. Her mother said she had to be 21. But she says that she could handle money so she negotiated and they eventually split her wages down the middle.

50:05

When asked if she was a member of a trade union she says yes. She says it was the garment workers' union. She doesn't remember any strikes. She thinks that everybody was fairly treated and that she was fairly treated "No problem at all!" However she says about 3 months before she got married she walked out of the factory. She says that she had a difficulty with one job

"I couldn't even make my price. 12 months before you had your basic wage and made up whatever else they had to pay you. They came in then with a fall-back rate. Say you couldn't make your £5 they didn't make it up. They had this fall-back rate. It was about £4/5/-... it was less money. A lot of were finding that we could make that fall-back rate but we couldn't make that little bit extra that gets you a proper rate."

She says that they had a vote for it but she didn't vote for it and would never have voted for it even if she could make the rate because it wasn't fair. She says the ones who wanted it most were the fast ones who were making the most money. She says she did it for a fortnight but just barely managed to scrape her wages. She went to the supervisor and said she wanted to speak about the fall-back rate. She had short shrift from the supervisor and she felt very angry because at the time she'd worked there for 10 years. She says she wasn't willing for him to speak to her like that. She went down the next morning and asked for her cards. She was told to go home and think about it. She went back in 2 days and said that she wanted her cards. She says that she didn't know that she couldn't have the dole if you walked out of work because she'd never been on the dole in her life. She told them the situation at the dole. They spoke to the company and tried to persuade her to go back but she refused. After a couple of days they sorted her out with money and she had her dole. She never went back to the factory.

60:50

When asked about holiday she says that they had the bank holidays and a fortnight during the summer, 2 days Easter and 2 days Whitsun. She says that she went to Blackpool, Bournemouth, Weymouth with her friends from the factory.

62:25

She says the hours in the factory were between 8 and 5. They were asked to do overtime sometimes and they'd work until about 7.30. They'd also work on Saturdays and very rarely on a Sunday. She says she didn't mind working Saturday morning. One time she remembers jersey two pieces every night and Saturday morning. She says her parents didn't mind her working on a Sunday, because they weren't religious 'like that'. She says she didn't like working on a Sunday because for Saturday was the day they went out, went to Cardiff, went to the pictures etc. And Sunday was the day she went to church, went to see her cousins and went home. Sunday was more like a rest day.

65:07

She returned later as a part time worker. She says it didn't have the same atmosphere and the same closeness. It was more "dog eat dog." When asked if she's kept in touch with people from the factory she says Yes and she's in touch with one person now called Elinor who must be over 90 by now. They started in the factory at about the same time. She talks about Elinor for a while.

She says she made long term friends in the factory. They had a shock when they knew she was going to get married and thought it would be a big thing. But only 14 went to her wedding - she wanted a quiet wedding.

68:22

She says sometimes she found the work boring, but she says "I enjoyed it. I've got to say. I enjoyed the other side of it." She talks about some of the people she worked with and how some of them have now died. She then talks about Elinor again.

“The more I look back the more things come to me. It was pleasure – the company. It was an experience... because you had encounters with different people.”

75:14

END OF INTERVIEW/DIWEDD CYFWELIAD