

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/ LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI

Dunlop's (1952-c. 1954) and Lastex Yarn and Lactron Threads (LYLT), (c. 1954-65)

Hiwaun Industrial Estate

Interviewee: VSE082.2 Pat Howells

Date: 24: 2: 2016

Interviewer: Catrin Stevens on behalf of Women's Archive of Wales

The speaker confirmed her name, Mary Patricia Howells (maiden name Pendry) and her address. She lived most of her working life in Rhigos and worked on the trading estate which was very active at the time. Date of birth 4:10:1937.

Her father also worked as an engineer by trade in Dunlops and before she got married her mother worked in a chemist's. They came from the Rhondda originally. Her father was very active in sports and helped run the Sports and Social Club in Dunlops which held the annual Miss Dunlop competition. She has one brother (10 years younger) – Philip Pendry who is very clever and passed all his engineering exams.

She moved from the Rhondda when she was 9 and went to Rhigos school but found it difficult to catch up with the work because it was of a higher standard than the Rhondda. She then went to Ynyslwyd Secondary School which was an in-between school. She had to travel 7 miles to this school in Aberaman. She did catch up and enjoyed sport in particular – netball, rugby. She enjoyed her schooling.

She left school at 15 – she took a form home from school for her mother and father to have 5s. to help her stay on in school. But her father didn't want to put his wages on paper because he was in a tidy job. However she didn't regret finishing school. She led an active life and on Sundays she went up to Aberdare Hospital to help make jellies for the children. She liked the element of nursing and she would have liked to have gone on with this as a career.

4.45 She did have an interview for the job in Dunlops – but her father got her the job. In Dunlops she made aeroplane seats, car seats, beds – sponge beds – a tremendous variety of produce. There were more men there because they worked shift work and they did 'men's jobs' – they put the rubber into steam rooms on big

trolleys – work which was not suitable for women. Started work on her own but got to know people. Never been inside a factory before. The factory was big and it took a long time to get to know people. It was very noisy. Miss Givens (?) from the Rhondda was in charge of the factory as Personnel Officer. She introduced Pat to the Sports and Social committee.

Her job – The mattresses and cushions used to come out of the ovens (just like ordinary ovens but massive) and these were put in the workers' bays and her job was to trim them all round with a big shearing scissors and then a smaller one. She cut a piece of her finger off with one of these shears. No real training – just watching another experienced worker and then left on their own. Some couldn't cope with the noise and the French chalk – very fine chalk for dusting the rubber when it came out of the ovens hot and sticky. The women didn't do the mattresses – they did the smaller jobs – trimmings around bus seats etc. They had to lift the materials from the bay – once finished put on a conveyor belt on to the next stage.

10.10 Not given a set amount to do a day but they could earn a bonus if they went over their target. Everybody had targets and they were an incentive to do one's work. She earned £1 96 (?) per week at the age of 15 and when 18 had a pay rise and again at 21. She remembers having her pay docket and handing it over to her mum. She used to have pocket money in return. Her mother bought her clothes – her mother had a premier club and paid into it every week. When it had reached £10 they had a voucher which she had for her clothing. A kind of savings' club on her behalf. Pocket money – 2/6 which was enough for her to go to Aberdare to the cinema and perhaps enough for a bag of chips. She could walk to work – they lived in Beacon Road – houses built for workers on industrial estate, the bosses of the factory came down from Birmingham (the main base) to live in the bungalows to do the top managerial jobs. She worked at 8 – 5. Short break in the morning, dinner and break in the afternoon. Food trolley came round in the morning with lovely toast. Then to the canteen for dinner (photograph of women there) – mid-day some bought lunch but lots of people couldn't afford it and brought their own. No tea trolley in the afternoon – just a break from the machine. Not allowed to smoke but there was smoking room. The workers didn't talk because the supervisor was very strict. **People didn't used to talk years ago, it was just work, work, work.** Repetitive but not hard work.

16.15 Then she had a chance to move to a new factory – subsidiary of Dunlops next door called **Lastex Yarn and Lactron Threads (LYLT)** – explains that the factory used to make the small threads in elastic. This was c. 1954. Only a few of them decided to transfer – a new start. She was interested in anything that got her further in her job. She found she was good at this job – a skill which suited her and she was clever at. Six foot round drums with flat solid wood all around – had to put the elastic on this big drum from sacks to ensure there were no knots in it. Produced elastic for Oldham Elastic – to make corsets; their local firm was Penn Elastic, Swansea. They went down in sacks and if they couldn't cope she was summoned to go down to

Penn Elastics, to help them out. She found the work easy – after taking the thread off the drum she made a plait from it and it went into a sack. Then sent to the stores and then to customers. This was a brand new factory. Dunlop was an old factory. Conditions were very different.

20.28 In the new factory there was a lot of French chalk – gave people bad chests – she suffers from it. They were given white overalls in this factory (none in Dunlop) to protect their clothing because of the French chalk. Factory provided them and denoted their jobs from the collar- as a supervisor (see photo) she would have a blue collar and as a forewoman the overall would have a red collar. The other girls thought it was marvellous place to work but she wasn't aware of this because she had to oversee the girls and watch they weren't naughty or wicked. As a supervisor had to keep a distance between her and the girls.

In Dunlops – huge factory – c. 40 girls scattered through the factory (c. 100 in Lastex) . Men's jobs and women's jobs. In the new factory – strip lighting and also individual machine lights. Heating fine too. She lost the top of her finger in Dunlops but it was sewn back on. There was always a nurse on duty there day and night. The nurse sewed her finger up for her. There were lots of injuries.

24.30 Local attitudes – fine and girls expected to help their families by working. The wages were considered quite good. Mostly young single girls working there and also some married women – all working full time – no part-time work. She became a supervisor at Lastex Yarns when a manager came down from Coventry – this was within 6 months of moving there. Her job then was to 'train' new girls. No qualification at all. Then there was a vacancy for a forewoman but because she wasn't yet 21 (had to be 21 to become a forewoman) not allowed. Forewoman would be in charge of everything, as a supervisor in charge of the girls – had to be skilled in the work. They came to her with personal problems too e.g. lots of them falling pregnant and couldn't carry on with the work. They had a bench in Lastex Yarns where pregnant girls could sit and do lighter work. So, of course, if someone sat on the bench everyone else knew she was pregnant. The men used to come in from the engineers' shop and notice who was on the bench! No problems from periods – machines in toilets for this. The girls stood at their machines all day – some couldn't cope.

28.49 When she was a forewomen she would have to interview new girls. There was an understanding between the companies on the estate that they couldn't take other firm's workers. They would have to finish in one factory before they started with another. She told them that when they had finished their previous employment she would guarantee them a job. No aptitude test. The girls worked in pairs. Pay better when she was a forewoman. She had buttons on her overall whilst the girls had a wrap around. The overalls got very dirty and each girl had a specific number and two overalls allocated to her. Changed every week and laundered. The French chalk had to be blown off their overalls with a blowing machine about five minute before the

end of the day's work. No masks. Certainly knows people who have suffered and no compensation. She has pumps to help her breathe today.

32.23 When she worked in Dunlops when it was very hot from the massive ovens in this huge factory (size of a football pitch) the company provided squash to break their thirst. No overalls in Dunlops. There was a cloakroom upstairs (Lastex) where they kept their overalls. She remembers the Lastex factory going on fire. She was returning from the Hirwaun pictures with her boyfriend and they could see the factory on fire. Her father and her went down – a tremendous fire, and she helped the nurse with the awful burns from the rubber etc. She was paid for this! She had first aid training. This was c. 1959-60. They rebuilt the factory – new roof. Her father helped with finding the water hoses. All the brand new overalls had burned. All the workers helped to get the factory back on its feet within a week. Toilets good and a cleaner on the deck all the time.

As a supervisor she had a clerk – who recorded if there was a new ream of yarn Time and motion man came over from Dunlops but they had to watch the girls because they might work more slowly to give themselves smaller targets! They were crafty. Clocking in and clock out. No clocking in for others. If late – given three chances – eventually dismissed. She didn't like doing that. She trained as a First Aider – it was compulsory as a supervisor and she was in charge of the key. If necessary a nurse would come from Dunlops. No big accidents.

39.13 Talking at machines and lots of songs. There was a music club – each one picked an artist and paid a penny and which ever girl's artist was on the wireless first on that day she would have the money. They made their own fun. One hour of radio a day. Also they paid a shilling a week to have their hair done. People couldn't afford to pay for perms so they pooled money and each girl would take it in turn to have a perm with a hairdresser in Hirwaun. Like a raffle – to raise morale in the factory. No tricks played on new workers. Collected when someone got married.

The Sports and Social Club organised a dance every Xmas. They contributed to it from their pay during the year. Down in Ynys stadium they had an archery class which she organised. Dunlops had plays on the stage in the canteen and then they took these plays up to Birmingham (main factory) to compete, also rugby team – the women had a netball team played against local sides. They didn't have any posts so the engineers made them some from her measurements from a book. Miss Givens' organised taking presents for children's homes Xmas times. Tea parties for employees' children – one child each – didn't matter if not married. Hired room in a pub in Aberdare. Their Xmas dance was held in a big canteen on the estate-records, no meal but a bar or a hotel in Aberdare. No drinks in factory Xmas eve.

47.10 Beauty competition – she would go around with paper and pencil and tell the other girls they would be competing. Always a good turn out. The judges were unfamiliar to them. No evening dresses or talking, just parading in bathing costumes

on the stage in Dunlops' Canteen in summer. She never won! They also organised a tug of war (she was anchor of that and she won that and the long jump and high jump perhaps) on the same day as Miss Dunlop competition. No responsibility with the post of Miss dunlop! No teasing between men and girls – no men in Lastex Yarns.

Trade Union – she was a member. No disputes, uncertain which union it was. Everyone a member. Sometimes when the girls had their pay – it might be wrong and it was her job to check it – going through their work sheets. 'Because I used to like to fight for the girls.' As a staff member couldn't be a shop steward. No perks and no pilfering.

52.25 They had factory holidays July –August with the miners. Closed factory. Bank holidays – but only one day at a time. When she was in school she cycled back and fore (7 miles each way) with her boyfriend. Later they bought a sports car and they motored all the way down to Nice c. early 1960s. She is an adventurous person. Her husband worked in Tower Colliery for 38 years.

After she got married she stayed on until 1965 – until c. 8 weeks before her daughter was born. No option to return to factory. Did several other jobs – though she did work in the Hearing Aid factory and then a small sewing factory. Later she became a manager in a Shell Garage. She's always said to herself 'in my mind a woman can do the same as a man'. The Social club was well supported.

58.45 She did enjoy working in the factory and it made her the person she is today. Arrangement - treated one another well. When she got married she had a present off the girls and again when the baby was due, the bosses didn't give her anything.

Reunions organised – and a photographic collection on view. The work fostered team spirit. Sometimes they might have a bad loom – they would be compensated. Fitters came to mend machines. Men paid more than the women.

Working in the factories showed her how to grow up. And she realised she was as good as anyone else. She doesn't recollect any swearing in the factory.