

LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI / VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR
Slimma/Dewhirst, Fishguard

Name: VSW023 Caroline Bowen

Interviewer: Susan Roberts for Women's Archive Wales

(Note that Caroline falls outside the period that the project focuses on. she started work circa 1993, but her interview was recorded along with two other during a literacy and numeracy class in letterston memorial hall – tutor frances allen. Caroline's interview and attitudes provide an interesting foil to the other interviews)

Caroline's maiden name was Caroline Davies. She was born on 25th October, 1968. She was born at St Thomas's Hospital, Merlin's Bridge, Haverfordwest. Her father worked for the Council and her mother was a 'full time mum'. She is an only child. She attended Mount Airey Primary School in Haverfordwest until she was seven years old. She then went on to the next school in Lower Barn Street in Haverfordwest, and on to Tasker Milward High School. She wasn't fond of school and said, '**it was the worst experience of my life**'. She loved being outdoors, and loved being at home with her mother and grandfather, going for walks and gardening in all types of weather. When she went to school, it was a two mile walk, and she would scream all the way. When she arrived she would be dropped off and the teacher would grab her hand and shove her into the class room. The school looked out across the valley and she could see her house, so she would spend her whole time looking at it, wishing she could go home. She would spend every weekend at her grandparents smallholding. She would hide every Sunday, when it was time to go home because she didn't want to go to school on the Monday.

She left school at fifteen because she was being bullied. She was diagnosed with dyslexia when she was thirteen years old, which meant she was put back a year at secondary school. As a result she was bullied terribly. The school didn't tackle the bullying. She was being bullied by children from a rough family, so Caroline went straight to a YTS scheme with the council in 1986. She loved the work. She was working in the outdoors with approximately 350 men. It was a relaxed atmosphere and she had a 'laugh'. The ones on the scheme were between fifteen years old and seventeen. She went on to do hotel work because she wanted to work in catering, although she now considers this decision to have been a disaster. When she was on the YTS scheme she learnt a variety of skills quickly like building and gardening.

Caroline went on to hotel management. (She'd done a course for this at the old Pembrokeshire college.) This isn't the career that she wanted but she feels as if she was

pushed in this direction. In those days girls did 'girls jobs'. She regrets that she didn't pursue what she really wanted to do which was to work outside.

00.11.33: She said, **'I regret to this day that I didn't do what was in my heart'**.

She worked at Fishguard Bay Hotel, and did housekeeping. She enjoyed doing bar work and meeting people but didn't enjoy working when there were parties on. She enjoyed speaking to the old people who would come into the bar, and the stories they would tell.

She went to work for the ferry company Stena, but shifts on the boat were twelve hours long. The job was well paid, but she would go from work to bed, and back to work when she got up. This was a relief job and her boyfriend at the time (who later became her husband and then ex-husband) didn't like the friendship she enjoyed with other members of staff. She enjoyed the work despite the conditions endured in gale force winds! She would get extremely tired and sometimes wouldn't remember the drive home from work.

The decision to go to Slimma was based on her circumstances – her grandparents had become unwell, and her boyfriend wanted her to be at home. At Slimma they might advertise for a group of cutters, and people would go along and ask for a job. Candidates were interviewed and if they weren't taken on for that job, quite often they would be taken on in another capacity.

Caroline went along looking for any old job. The interview was a very unpleasant experience. The atmosphere was very 'strait-laced' and Caroline feels that some of the questions were awkward. After an interview with the supervisor you went to see the manager. You were then put on whichever line they thought you would be good at. (They decided what you were good at.) Caroline felt the interview questions were quite personal, such as the one about who she lived with. According to Caroline, Slimma's was the type of place where people would know who you were and who your grandparents were. Caroline felt this type of atmosphere was claustrophobic. Her grandmother was a post mistress in Goodwick, her auntie was a local relief teacher, her grandfather had worked on the harbour for approximately fifty years, so Caroline felt you had no privacy.

Caroline said that, 'women are the bitchiest people going'. Caroline talked about the experiences of her eldest daughter who's friends are mainly boys. Caroline has had a similar experience.

23.44 Caroline found that the factory environment was very cliquey. She was put in the jean department. Her job was to cut excess pieces of material away from the belt loops, and cut the material in between the button hole to make a hole. Therefore she would be in one circle, and other girls, for example the girls making the boxer shorts. One aisle wouldn't talk to a different aisle. At dinner time the girls would stick to the same people. Caroline felt that she didn't fit in because she couldn't keep up with the quota. She was supposed to do thirty in one hour, and said that if you couldn't keep up, the supervisor would be on your back. She would be thinking to herself, 'just bugger off'. The supervisors were generally women, and would constantly be reminding Caroline that her quota was down and that her pay packet would be down at the end of the week. If the quota had gone down too far, the worker would have to go to her office, and be reprimanded. This happened to Caroline a couple of times.

A worker might not have clocked in on time because there would be other workers in the queue before them, holding them up. In Caroline's case the supervisor would then tell her that her quote was down because she was a minute late.

26.56: She said, 'They knew how to twist it, and they twisted it very well'. Girls couldn't answer back as this would be seen as insubordination. Caroline would just take the reprimand without answering back. When Caroline would be called up to the office the experience would be 'horrible' as she didn't know what she would be going up there for.

Boys would come round with work for Caroline to do and put items on her trolley. She would see her pile getting higher and higher, but the work had to be done. The work started affecting Caroline's hands and she'd only be doing the work for six months. One day, the main supervisor was off work. Caroline describes her as a 'right rottweiler'. One of the other supervisors came across because Caroline's numbers were going down. She couldn't hold the scissors properly and the jeans were so thick that she was having difficulty in cutting. She was required to provide her own scissors, so she had to buy a scissors every four weeks. Caroline couldn't buy a cheap pair as this wouldn't do the work. The cost approximately twelve pounds and she thought that the company should have been providing them. Caroline went to see this other supervisor to explain that her quotas were going down because her hands were sore. All the girls in her circle (section) had straps on their hands. They would be strapped up just to strengthen the thumbs. This supervisor was sympathetic and said she would move Caroline. As a consequence she went on to do boxer shorts. The girl that she was now working with was brilliant and she could sew very quickly. Caroline found it difficult to keep up with her, but succeeded in doing this. Caroline's job was then cutting an inch of the elastic either side of the pants for the next lot of knickers to be sewn together (front and back). But there was always a 'blasted' quota'. If Caroline flagged she would be holding up the next person in the line.

Caroline feels her usual supervisor wouldn't have been so sympathetic and may have told her where to go if she couldn't cope with the work. This is something that did happen to girls, according to Caroline.

00.21.21: She said, 'They wore you down'. According the Caroline, rather than sack workers they would wear them down. About a year later Caroline had slid on some oil on the floor and broken her arm. She had managed to work for a few hours. Eventually she phoned her grandfather to come and fetch her. Because she hadn't reported it straight away and put it in the accident book, they claimed she hadn't fallen in the factory. She went off on sick, and because she hadn't been there long enough she lost her job.

Later on a friend informed her that a job had come up in the kitchens at Slimma. She got the job but it was one that she enjoyed. She got on well with the chef.

00.34.15: She said, 'There was enough room in the kitchen for us to avoid each other'. There would be sarcastic comments from the workers when they came into the canteen. It took Caroline a while to get used to this.

Everybody in Fishguard went to work there, because there was no other work. The teachers at Fishguard High School used to push the girls into doing sewing as a step towards getting work in Slimma. When the place closed down everybody was in shock.

Caroline started work in Slimma in approximately 1993. She thinks that if your face didn't fit at Slimma, you wouldn't get a job there. They didn't want trouble. Attitudes towards the girls who worked at Slimma were good, because this meant that they had an income, and a good income. They had status.

Caroline's first day at the factory was scary. Three other girls started the same day as her. Inside the factory, she could see all the workers sat in rows, behind their machines. Caroline had never realised there were that many people in Fishguard. The noise was overpowering. Caroline knows of quite a lot of people who lost their hearing, especially those sat in the middle of a block and there would be machines either side. Caroline would suffer from headaches and knows many people who suffered from chest complaints such as asthma due to the dust. Health and Safety rules were beginning to come in but they weren't very evident at the time.

00.43.18: She said, 'I hated it, I hated it. And it was a fact, I had to go to work'.

There were male workers doing ironing, and doing the boxing. The cutters were at the bottom of the scale. A person's pay scale determined their status. Everybody knew their place and Caroline was at the bottom. For Caroline, work at the factory started at seven o'clock (after seeing to the animals on the farm). She travelled to work in her grandfather's old mini-van. The banter in the factory between the men and the women lightened the mood in the factory. Caroline didn't feel she was entitled to join in in this banter because her status at the factory was too low, and she was much shier then than she is now. The women who had been there the longest had the highest status. Many people had nick names. One of the women was called 'Gobby' for obvious reasons. Opportunities to move into other positions did exist within the factory, but this usually meant that somebody had to have vacated a position first. Caroline wasn't offered any training but wasn't that interested anyway.

00.49.05: If one of the girls got pregnant they would stay on until the last minute, and have a baby shower. There would be a 'big fuss'. This happened when Caroline herself got married. They put ribbons up in work and they were counting down the days to the wedding. (She was in the canteen at this time.)

00.50.15: Caroline thinks that the company were family orientated. They would allow mothers whose children were ill to go and pick their children up from school as long as they came straight back to work. Caroline can't remember how she was paid when she worked at the factory, but it was the minimum wage and didn't have a pay rise when she was there because she couldn't reach her targets. She would be paid in cash, in a little brown envelope. On the last day of the week (usually a Friday) Caroline would go into the office to get her pay packet and be told that she that she hadn't done well in her bonus that week. Workers would receive a box of chocolates at Christmas time. There was a union at the factory but Caroline wasn't a member because she wasn't earning much money and thought it was an extra expense she couldn't afford.

00.53.40: Caroline thinks that the Slimma bosses were considered to be good bosses but she didn't like the factory system. Caroline had to work a Saturday from time to time if they were behind with a 'shipment'. Of the supervisors Caroline said that their status had gone up, and as a consequence, 'their noses had gone up'. Caroline didn't like being told she couldn't go the toilet even though she said it was understandable that the supervisors restricted when the girls could do. One of the girls who was pregnant brought in a doctor's note saying that she needed to be allowed to go the the toilet when she felt the need. Caroline didn't wear a uniform at work but rather wore old, comfortable clothes as 'it wasn't a clean job'. There would be fluff and bits of material everywhere.

The scissors that Caroline used were razor sharp and could easily have caused injury. She remembers one of the girls was injured by her machine when a needle went through her finger and she was screaming in pain. Caroline still experiences pain in her hands as a result of the work that she did at the factory. Many of the women who worked there have had carpal tunnel syndrome as a result of working at the factory. There was a nurse at the factory, although Caroline never went to see her. Instead, she carried plasters in her pocket for when she cut her hands. If she had gone to see the nurse, she would have had to fill in a form. (Caroline's dyslexic.)

00.59.10: No food, chewing gum or sweets were allowed on the factory floor. Smoking was allowed during factory time. Caroline said they weren't allowed to talk when they were working, but the workers couldn't talk anyway because it was too noisy. Some girls who wanted to make a head start would come into the work at six o'clock in the morning. Caroline would have to walk through them to get to her post, and feels that this would be frowned upon, as they weren't supposed to walk around.

01.01.30: **"Too flippin' hot"**

There was some sort of supervisor responsible for Health and Safety who would ensure that material bins and chairs were straight so nobody fell over. There were no health and safety courses. The temperature on the factory floor was "freezing" because it was such a huge room. However when Caroline was cutting boxer shorts, she was surrounded by machinery that made it "too flippin' hot."

01.03.40: **"Can you remember what you're supposed to be doing?"**

Music was played over a tannoy. Everyone would hum along to Radio 2. When a popular song was played, the workers' humming would drown the noise of the machines. Sometimes birthday requests were sent in to the radio station and a cake would be produced. Songs by Queen or anything from the sixties were the most popular songs to sing along to. **When things got too loud a voice over the tannoy would say "Can you remember what you're supposed to be doing?"**

01.06.40: Facilities: Caroline remembers that there weren't enough toilets to accommodate the workers and they often had to queue. The men, however seemed to have a sufficiency of toilet facilities.

There was also a first aid room and Caroline believes there was a nurse but can't recall if she (the nurse) was on duty at all time.

01.08.10: When the opportunity arose to chat, Caroline remembers that gossip was the order of the day – “the in thing” – about the previous night or weekend’s activities.

01.10.00: As far as the matter of compensation for any health issues arising from work (such as the effect on workers’ hands) Caroline can’t remember any instance of an award being made. Since the effects might not be felt immediately, once the company was no longer in existence she feels it would have been impossible to pursue any claim in retrospect.

01.10.50: The older female workers would tease younger boys who came to work at the factory.

01.12.05: Working days were Monday-Friday, Half day Friday and occasional Saturdays (mornings). There was a quarter of an hour break in the morning. But many girls including Caroline would have a quick toilet stop and straight back to work to “catch up”. The canteen supplied full cooked breakfasts from 10 am onwards.

01.16.40: There was an annual 3 week shut-down at the factory when everyone had to take leave. No time-off was permitted at other times. Girls would go on holiday together and family groups would hire minibuses and go to Butlins.

Caroline’s journey to work took 10 minutes.

Caroline didn’t tend to socialise with work colleagues outside work but the whole factory would celebrate Christmas on the factory floor on Christmas Eve when work would stop and hampers would be brought in. Many workers would go on to Fishguard and you could bet on finding Slimma workers in any of the town’s pubs.

01.21.05: To sum-up. On the whole, Caroline didn’t enjoy her time working at Slimma. The monotony of the work and the regimentation of the work routine didn’t appeal. She’d suffered miscarriages in the past but as soon as she stopped working at the factory she had a successful pregnancy and gave birth to her first child. Caroline hints at a possible connection between her unsuccessful pregnancies and the stress and constant bending at work. She now has two daughters.

01.28.15: **“But I am never gonna let ‘em do what I did.”**

Talking about her daughters, Caroline expresses the wish that they don’t follow in her footsteps.

01.29.55: **“...how would you describe your experience working at Slimma?”**

Caroline: **“Hell.”**

Caroline draws a comparison with workhouses. Caroline feels she was pushed into work she didn’t want to do. She felt compelled to do it. She recalls her feelings about her first day at work – the worst day. It was scary. So many people shut into one small space. Looking back now, Caroline is horrified to think that if something had happened, how would all those people have escaped.