

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/ LLEISIAU O LAWR Y FFATRI

Milford Haven Flax Factory, 1942 - 1948

Interviewee: VSW039 Sylvia Poppy Griffiths

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Interviewer: Susan Roberts on behalf of Women's Archive of Wales

Date of Birth: 11th November 1925

Poppy was born at 15 Marble Hall, Milford Haven on the 11th November, 1925. Her grandmother lived next door. Her father was at sea and was in both world wars but was lost at sea, minesweeping. She was seventeen when she lost her father.

Poppy had an elder brother who died in 1940. She also had a younger brother. Poppy's mother died when she was two years old, after the last baby was born. She was brought up by her aunt, who she lived with until she got married.

She went to Milford Haven school when she was five years old, until she was seven years old. Then her father re-married following the death of her mother. She then lived in Old Market for seven years until she left school aged fourteen and went back to live with her aunt.

She didn't attend a secondary school, just the school in Milford which was 'an ordinary village school.' Her father wanted her to try for Tasca's (a high school for girls) but she didn't want this. She wanted to return to her aunt in Milford Haven.

Somebody suggested that there was work available on a farm, so she went to work there. The hours were nine o'clock until three o'clock and she was paid half a crown a week. She was cleaning the dairy, and the flags, getting the men in from the fields for their dinner. She didn't stay long. She didn't like it. She had to walk nearly two miles to get to work. She then went to work as a potato picker, and in Woolworth's as a seasonal worker over the Christmas rush.

The woman in charge at Woolworth's had said that if they wanted Poppy they would send for her but Poppy told her that she had to go and do war work as she'd received a letter telling her to start work at the flax factory.

She was very nervous due to the big machinery.

00.06.15: ‘I thought Good Lord, I’ll never be able to manage that.’

But they only had to feed into the machines.

She knew some of the people working at the factory. She started work on a conveyor but she asked if she could be taken off this because she would still be moving (like the motion of the machine) when she went home.

She asked to be moved to the seed room where she had to change the bags of chaff, and keep everything clean because there was a danger that a fire could start. This was all part of the war effort. The flax was used to make parachute harnesses.

Poppy isn’t sure whether anything was made for the Spitfire aeroplanes as well.

Every farmer in Pembrokeshire had to grow a field of flax. In the summer Poppy would go around on the back of a lorry, and would pull up the flax.

00.09.54: ‘One would pull, and the other behind would be tying in sheaves.’ The farmer would collect this harvest and put it in his barn.

It had to be dried. Then the men on the lorries had to bring the flax in to the factory. That would then be loaded up onto elevators into the factory.

Poppy was caught smoking when she worked there and was told to take three days off work, but her boss came after her and told her to take just a day and a half off, as they couldn’t afford to have her off work for too long. She never smoked there again.

The foreman had opened the toilet door to get the girls out and this is how Poppy was caught. The time off taken was without pay.

The pay at the time was three pounds a week, although Poppy says they couldn’t buy much with their wages because everything was rationed.

The factory was huge, and the machines were huge. There were three long machines and then up a couple of steps there was another three machines. Her first job was keeping the sheaves on the conveyor. Some girls were sent to King’s Lyn for training, and then these girls trained girls like Poppy. The work was very dirty because there was a lot of dust and because it was during the war they weren’t allowed to let the light show through the windows.

00.14.52: ‘The dust was like a fog... We had nothing to stop the noise. We had nothing to stop the dust. We never had nothing, no.’

There was no uniform. They used to wear their own boiler suit, or bib and brace. They did give them head scarves because if the belts had them, they would have been scalped.

There were a few accidents. Poppy remembers going in to do the night shift one Sunday evening and one of the boys lost an eye. Another time, somebody started the machine and ripped the middle right out of her friend's arm. She was taken to hospital straight away. Poppy doesn't know if these people were compensated for accidents.

Poppy was very happy that she was working there.

00.17.46: She said, 'We used to sing at the top of our voice, but we couldn't hear ourselves.'

There were about three of them on a table, and they had to thin out the flax in order for the feeder to feed it through the machine. They used to sing all the war songs. (She still sings them now.) They tried playing music for the workers but it couldn't be heard.

Poppy thinks the work affected her hearing. The dust also affected her chest somewhat although they had x-rays every so often, and then a report would be sent back to say all was clear.

After working in the seed room she worked feeding the machines but had to watch that her hand didn't go in.

00.20.33: Poppy describes the photograph from the flax factory.

There were three shift to start, and then they went on to two shifts – days and nights.

On the day shift she'd start at seven o'clock and finish at half past five. For the night shift, they'd go to work at eight and finish at seven in the morning. Poppy didn't mind working night shift but she couldn't eat a cooked dinner when she got up which meant that she would be starving at one o'clock in the morning.

There was a canteen there but Poppy says she didn't have the money to buy from there. Poppy gave her auntie money for her keep and kept the rest of her wages. They'd agreed on that before she started, that she would pay her way. She used to go to the cinema about twice a week. She wouldn't go out much, she was too tired anyway.

00.23.39: 'I remember the first day I started in the factory. I went to the pictures that night and somebody said, 'Whatever have you done to your head. Blicin' great tide mark right round there.'"

There were no facilities for having a wash in the factory. Of the girls working at the factory, it was mainly single women working there.

00.24.41: 'We were too young like see, but we had to do the work and we had to do it right.'

The men at the factory did a lot of the lifting, although women had to lift as well because the forewoman told them, '**You girls will never be mothers.**' They used to lift heavy bales and stack them. The forewoman's prophecy didn't come true because Poppy had four children.

There were men working as fitters, and doing other jobs seeing to the machines. The women didn't do these jobs. Poppy thinks that they were paid more.

It wasn't possible to take a day off. That was out of the questions.

00.27.30: 'Work was work then.'

She was paid a flat rate of three pounds a week. They had to queue up for their pay in the canteen.

Her first pay packet was one pound, seventeen, and then she went on to different work. The highest pay was the dressing and the grading of the flax. Poppy ended up doing that. She did this when she was up in King's Lynn and when she went back to Milford said that she was now a dresser and would carry on as one.

They all paid money to the Union.

Poppy remembers there was a fire there once and they were all sent home. It wasn't a large fire and it was soon put out.

Poppy thinks that the factory bosses were quite fair. They were very strict about clocking in and clocking out. If you were late you would have your wages docked. Poppy wasn't late very often. Her uncle used to wake her up to go to school because he had to go to the munitions factory.

Poppy had intended joining the land girls but was frightened of animals so her aunt advised her against this. When she was sixteen she was told she had to register so she went to the Labour Exchange. She had also always wanted to join the army, and tried every way to get out of the factory but couldn't.

Poppy would walk to work and it would only take her five minutes. Everybody got on well in the factory.

00.33.41: 'We all knew our work, and we all went to it, and that was it.'

They had a female supervisor for the women. They would have tea brought up to the factory in an urn. They had a break in the morning and afternoon, as well as the lunch time break. Poppy would go home for her lunch.

00.36.07: "It was an interesting job and you knew that it was helping the war effort."

When Poppy went out to the field to pick the flax the hours were longer. They might be working up until ten or quarter past ten.

00.36.51: 'Sometimes you'd go to put your coat on, time to go home, "Overtime tonight".'

They couldn't refuse to work the over time.

00.37.08: 'You couldn't see a soldier refusing to do anything, could you? Well, you was part of that like, see. You was doing war work.'

During the blackouts they would be locked in, and couldn't open a window.

'It was a proper building, brick building, lovely.'

There was always a cleaner who washed the floor, to clean the toilets, wash the hand basins.

Because it was so noisy, Poppy would have to shout if she wanted to speak to the girls. After going home, her auntie would tell her not to shout. She now has a hearing aid in one ear, although she thinks that she needs a hearing aid for the other ear. She says that she was put on 'the rollers' in the factory, and that they used to make a terrible noise.

00.41.58: 'We'd chat about the dates we had, the sailors, or whatever you had - always about men.'

As well as the non-smoking rule, and clocking in and out, the girls had to keep the place clean.

Poppy tells the story of meeting Roy James (the man who lost his eye) again years later. They didn't stop hugging.

One day after finishing work they asked the chap at the factory who had the trailer, and the wagon behind it, if they could have a lift home. He took them all the way to Johnston (an extra three miles) and they had to walk all the way back, and they were black as the ace of spades. (He had taken them too far as a prank.) He'd said, 'You won't ask again.'

Poppy didn't socialise much with the girls outside work as it was the time of blackout. She did go to dances. The girls from work tended to go to places where the soldier went, but Poppy wasn't allowed to go there. She wasn't allowed to go to a proper dance until she returned from King's Lynn. Her auntie told her she'd proven she could look after herself and allowed her to go to dances from then on.

As far as the working week was concerned, sometimes Poppy would start working on a Sunday night and finish on a Friday night. She was also asked to come in on a Saturday night when they had a lot of work on.

In the factory in King's Lynn the meals cost 10p.

Poppy thinks she had approximately a month's holiday every year. There was no shut-down – people would take leave at different times. Poppy used to go to Neath for her holidays, where she had family.

The people who worked in the family were from Milford, Neyland, Pembroke, Pembroke Dock. They got to work on buses.

They used to have concerts in the canteen, where somebody would get up and sing lunchtime. Poppy had to go fire watching one Christmas day, and stayed in the canteen overnight. She and the others had to take a blanket and a couple of cushions. Luckily no incendiaries were dropped that night. She didn't feel frightened and they were all singing.

Poppy started in the flax factory in 1942 (or beginning of 1943) until 1948 when the factory finished. She then went away to Berkshire. The forewoman from the flax factory had found work for them in a canteen. It was at a little halt, just passed Swindon and when they travelled there they missed the stop. The boss's wife was waiting for them in the station. The halt was Wantage Road. The girls went on strike during the time she worked here. She was working in the potato room, the vegetable room, although she could do any job they asked her to do like go on the counter. The girls came to her and said that she had to come out on strike with them, so she took her potato peeler and off she went.

The boss himself came and asked what it was all about. The girls encouraged Poppy to speak up. She asked for what the girls wanted – they wanted tea out of a teapot not out of an urn, if they were married they wanted to live together. The boss said he'd agreed to everything they'd asked for, providing they went back to work. (This was in an army camp.) The workers in the camp were building roads, and building houses after the war. Poppy went back to the canteen. The Irish boss on the other shift told her to be ready to leave at two thirty. She was told to go to the office so that he could give her any wages that were due to her. But Poppy disputed the amount that he was giving her, saying she had money due to her because she had worked in the bakehouse, and insisted she wanted what was due to her. She was given a warrant to go home.

She got another job straight away in the Sailor's Rest after returning to Milford.