

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

The Metal Box Factory, Neath from 20<sup>th</sup> May, 1946 – October, 1949

**Interviewee:** VSW044 Vanda Morwen Williams (maiden name Vanda Morwen West-Jones)

**Date of Interview:** 25.2.14

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

Vanda was born in Landor Avenue in Margam. Vanda's father did a variety of jobs which she described as 'umbrella' jobs – they would open and shut. Her grandparents were involved in the scrap metal trade, and her father would go and dismantle things. He worked over in Ireland, and for Rincon. When Vanda was a child he worked on the sand siding in Margam, which involved filling trucks. He would fill two trucks full of sand before breakfast. He would go in the next day, following a gale, and have of it would have been blown out.

Vanda moved to Baglan, in the house she still lives in, in 1931. Her father would cycle five miles down to the Morfa every day, and fill the trucks with sand. He eventually went to work for Wards in Briton Ferry, which was a company that dismantled ships. He then went to work at Baglan Bay, and the Whitford Works.

Vanda is one of two children. Her sister is sixteen years her junior. Before Vanda's mother was married she worked as a tailoress in Albany Road, Cardiff.

Vanda went to Baglan School, which was a church school, until she was eleven years old. She had diphtheria when she was ten years old, and nearly died. She was eleven years old when the war broke out and says this meant you couldn't learn. She tried her eleven plus and failed by seventeen marks, so went to Trefelen School in Port Talbot. Initially there a girls' school down stairs and boys' school upstairs. She left when she was fourteen years old and went to work for DW Jones printers in Port Talbot.

She remembers going for an interview. She was left in the room where there was a two shilling coin (a florin) behind the door in the room which had been put there in order to test whether she was honest. Vanda says it was slave labour. She would stand at a machine for

hours on end feeding sheets of paper into it in order to make posters. It was a boring job, although she was quite happy there.

**00.18.43: ‘I had my cousin Mabel with a break down, Dad with pleurisy, and mum expecting Elaine – she was five months pregnant [and I was] fifteen years old... There’s a hymn in Sanky’s and it says on it, “All the way my Saviour leads me, what have I to ask beside, can I doubt his tender mercy, who through life has been my guide. “ That stuck with me for years, you know. And I feel as if my life has been guided, from when I was born.’**

She was receiving seven shillings and ten pence a week in wages at the printers to be trained in book binding. It was a three year course, and when they finished they received one pound, seven and ten. Her friend, Pat, at the printers suggested that they go down to the Metal Box factory to look for work. Her father disapproved of this plan. She hadn’t given the implications of working at the factory much thought at the time, but considered going in order to follow her friend.

She finished at DW Jones on 17th May, 1946 and started work in the Metal Box on 20<sup>th</sup> May 1946.

It was shift work at the factory – morning, afternoon and nights. She started on the same shift as her friend, Pat, but after only three months they changed their shifts. The shift pattern was a week of mornings, a week of afternoons, and a week of nights. She lost contact with Pat as a consequence because they didn’t work together after that.

Vanda was put on the presses, which meant feeding four machines. She was seventeen years old, with not enough food to eat (food was rationed at the time.) They wore green overalls, and green peaked caps. They would be thrown in a dumper before they came home, in order to be washed. They would clock on and clock off at work. There would be a quarter of an hour break in the morning for breakfast and half an hour for lunch. There was a canteen in the factory.

When Vanda first started in the factory she was put in the lacquer department and the smell made her feel sick. The work involved lacquering paper. Margaret, Vanda’s friend was on the printers and they would print the print onto the tins.

They could see in the factory that the lacquering job was making Vanda ill, so they her on the presses where she would pick up thick sheets of metal and put them into a slot. A bar would hold them in place. The machine would be started and stamped. It was heavy work.

She was later put on a different line which was packaging the tops of tins. Another woman working with her would stamp them with the correct size. They were then taken away to canning places. She didn’t expect the work to be as hard as it was. She began to suffer with a bad back and they refused to give her a lighter job.

She was off sick for twelve months with a bad back.

Metal Box made tins cans, and when Vanda was in the presses they were stamping out the tops and bottoms of the tins in different sizes. Sometimes the machines would fail and that machine would be shut down for a week until they repaired it.

**00.31.12: ‘The noise was terrible, and I used to come home and I’d be shouting when I came... The noise was horrendous. And Dad had warned me, but there you are you don’t take warnings.’**

**00.31.47: Vanda talks about Armistice Day, and her father suffering a brain haemorrhage on that day and his recovery.**

When Vanda was on night shift she would come home at seven o’clock in the morning and her mother, father and baby sister would be in bed. She would wash the floor and beat the mats, clean the scullery and go to bed.

She would get up at five o’clock in the afternoon and get ready to go back to work in the night. She would walk down the road at five o’clock in order to be in work at six.

Vanda would catch the service bus to work. Other people would cycle or catch the bus to work.

About a year or so before Vanda started there, it was a factory producing munitions. There were many men working there. Alun Michael was one of the white coats there (an ‘important job’ according to Vanda.)

**00.37.02: ‘A skivvy I was.... I didn’t want to be working there and looking back now, I wish I’d gone nursing then.’**

Vanda had always wanted to work in a chemist’s shop. She had tried and failed to get a job in Neath. After she left Metal Box, she was ‘idle’ for twelve months before getting a job in the Relay, collecting television rental money. Vanda describes this job.

**00.41.15: ‘I would never have go back to the Metal Box. It was an experience in life, but if I had my life over again, I would never have gone to the Metal Box. Never.’**

Vanda was there for a total of three years and five months. Vanda had found that the lifting took its toll on her back, and the shift work was also hard. There was a shift from 6.00am to 2.00pm, 2.00pm until 10.00pm, and 10.00pm – 6.00am.

Vanda talks about her friend Margaret, who worked at Metal Box. She was a gifted organist, who played the organ at church, but was ex-communicated when they found out she was illegitimate.

00.47.00: Vanda talks about her husband, Walter, and his unhappy childhood. They married when Vanda was fifty seven years old. Vanda talks about him becoming ill and passing away. 01.01.20

Vanda is still in contact with Pat, the friend with whom she started at Metal Box. They didn't work together because their shifts clashed. There wasn't much of a social life at Metal Box for Vanda while she worked there.

Some girls got promoted to being charge hands. Vanda wasn't interested in this, herself. In fact, she didn't enjoy any aspect of the work there, and regrets working there. She did eventually go into nursing, when she was forty years old.

From the Relay she went to work at Taibach putting the tickets on rationed meat, and did this work on weekends for two years. She then went to work in the Jersey Bakery but when the boss's wife married for the second time, his new wife wanted to choose new staff herself and sacked them all. She finished there on one weekend and started work in another the following Monday in Ken Griffiths' bakery, and took many of the Jersey Marine's customers with her. Vanda enjoyed this work within a family business, and the company of the family. She remembers one Christmas they had a large number of iced cakes ready in the bakery and had a blow out in the oven. She'd never seen such a mess in all her life. There was soot everywhere.

She also remembers that on one occasion they had a tray of congress tarts. They had a rat in the bakery, but couldn't find it. It jumped out of a bag one day. But the rat had nibbled nearly every congress tart. They took the tops off the tarts and iced them, and sold them as iced tarts.

The wages in the Metal Box were good, and the wages kept on increasing.

**01.10.59: 'If they'd given me a million pounds I wouldn't have stayed there.'**

Her back gradually got better after leaving the factory.

Vanda also worked at Tom Jones' chemist shop for five years. He knew Vanda's family, and asked if Vanda would be interested. It's what Vanda had always wanted. He was a marvellous boss. He retired and the shop was taken over by Anthony Jones.

Vanda eventually got fed up there. She could see that her sister was teacher, and she was stuck in a chemist shop working on the cosmetic counter, and had no interest in this department, so decided that she would try her hand at nursing. She went for an interview down in Port Talbot hospital, and did the test and was accepted. Vanda was told by her boss at the chemist that if things didn't work out for her in nursing she could return to the chemist shop.

Vanda has had a good working relationship with her bosses in various shops along the years. This wasn't the situation in the Metal Box. She said of the bosses in Metal Box,

**01.16.15: ‘You didn’t get that contact. And they were holier than thou perhaps as I thought then.’**

Unlike her shop work, she didn’t know who the managers were in the Metal Box. After working in the Metal Box she would never have considered working in another factory.

She nursed for nineteen years after starting in Port Talbot. When she was on the wards her old back problem which started when she was at the Metal Box recurred, and she developed spondylitis. She went to a chiropractor in Oxford Street, London for treatment for eight months.

She felt well enough to go back to work on a part-time basis in an out-patients’ department.

Vanda can’t remember any perks associated with working at the factory, and can’t remember going to any social events, for example, at Christmas time.

The work at Metal Box was dirty, and the smell of the lacquer made her feel sick.

Even though Vanda didn’t enjoy her experience there, she does think that they treated workers fairly. The pay wasn’t as good in other places.

Vanda considers that the work at Metal Box was dangerous. There were fork lift trucks being driven around there, and workers needed to be careful, although she doesn’t remember any accidents there. There was a nurse working there who would attend to any cuts sustained by workers.

Vanda found the work at the factory monotonous.

**01.31.20: She said, ‘It was monotonous. Repetition all the time.’**

Vanda would stay on the factory floor for her break.

Despite her back problems, Vanda doesn’t think she suffered any long term effects from working at the factory.

Vanda talks of a cyst she developed behind the knee, and her artificial knees, falls she’s sustained, and other medical problems. 01.43.50

There was bad language used in the factory by both men and women, and this was accepted practice, although Vanda never swore.

Vanda made many, many friends during her career in nursing.

The working week in Metal Box was five days a week, and over time on a Sunday was optional, but paid double time. Vanda never worked on a Sunday as she always went to chapel, and had a Sunday school class.

Vanda talks about her nurse’s uniform and her lymphedema.

Vanda thinks she had a month's holiday per year when she was in Metal Box, and would have to put in a request for leave on the dates required.

Vanda talks about her mother's blindness, and how she fed the wrong baby when she had her sister in the hospital.

Vanda talks of the work at the factory being physically demanding. She said,

**01.59.47: 'It was heavy. I wasn't built, stature wise, wasn't strong enough to do the job really. But I was conscientious because some of them would jam the machine so the machine would jam. I was very careful. And they used to say, "You've done well", because I didn't have a lot of scrap.... I did it to the best of my ability.'**