

LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI / VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR

Llamas garment making factory, Swansea (1952), Windsmoor garment making factory, Swansea (1952 – c. 1956), c Mettoys (1956 ---)

Interviewee: VSW052 Cynthia Rix
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Cynthia's maiden name was (Alice) Cynthia Richards. She was born on 10th July, 1938, in Eaton Crescent, Townhill, Swansea. After she married she had two children – one boy and one girl.

Her father was in the army, and her mother would only see him one weekend in every month. Cynthia's mother lived on the corner of Teilo Street (in Townhill). Teilo Street was bombed during the war as the Germans had been aiming for Swansea Docks. Her uncle and grandfather were killed by a bomb on their way home to Teilo Street. Their names are inscribed on the stone near TOPIC house.

During the times of the bombing Cynthia's grandmother, Katie Kenwood, took forty two people in. She opened up her house as a soup kitchen, and gave the people a place to stay for the night.

Cynthia had a sister who died when Cynthia was a baby. She also had four brothers. When her father finished in the army, times were hard. He started rearing chickens and ducks.

Cynthia's mother was from Llanelli, she was a 'saucepan', and had worked in the enamel works (before she got married). Her father got a job in the GPO. When they were twelve and thirteen, Cynthia and her brother started working for a few hours each day, in the Windsor cafe, chipping potatoes. Cynthia's father died when he was fifty nine.

Cynthia went to school in Townhill and left when she was fourteen. Cynthia enjoyed school, and when the time came for her to leave she cried, as did the other members of her class, but they were all already employed in the factories. According to Cynthia, at that time the factories were owned by Jewish people, and they were desperate for youngsters to go and work there. They were lovely people to work for but they could pay the youngsters less money.

00.08.24: She said, ‘I think it was all a part of growing up, and giving us the advantage of learning a skill.’

Cynthia was given a job at Llamas (garment making factory) but only lasted two weeks before she was sacked. Llamas made knickers ‘for old ladies’, football jerseys, scarves, but mainly garments for men. The factory was situated in the Trading Estate in Fforestfach.

00.09.30: She said, ‘I couldn’t sew in a straight line for love or money’.

As a result Cynthia was put on an overlocking machine which would cut the material as it sewed. One day, two weeks after she had started at the factory she was sewing (and therefore cutting) a football shirt. She carried on sewing until the shirt was reduced in size so much it would have fitted ‘a baby’. Cynthia hid the offending garment because she was frightened. She went up to where they kept the material and said she hadn’t received all the pieces. But the foreman came around and he found it. It was easy to find out whose garment it was because it would have had Cynthia’s name on it. Cynthia was called to the office. She was shaking on the office and she lied, saying it wasn’t hers. But her name was on it, and she was sacked instantly. She was terrified. She had her first week’s wages the first week that she was fired as she’d had to work a week in hand. She’d received three pounds and six pence for working from seven in the morning to half past four in the afternoon. Her mother met her at the bus stop. (She hadn’t told her that she’d been sacked – she was too afraid.) She’d placed her wages in her lap and when she got up her wages had fallen onto the floor without her noticing. She never got the wage packet back.

Her mother told her she would have to find another job. She wanted to know why Cynthia hadn’t told her the truth. She started crying and said it was because she was afraid.

00.13.11: She said, ‘In those days we were brought up young ...We weren’t allowed to grow up before our time.’

She then heard there was a job going in Windsmoor, which was round the corner from Llamas. This factory made mainly women’s garments such as coats and skirts. They would advertise vacant positions – they would have a notice on the wall outside saying that they were looking for workers. She was given a job working with the canvas that was put into the coats.

00.14.20: ‘I never, never listened to anybody, I always went my own way.

Somebody had shown Cynthia what to do but she didn’t take any notice. Nevertheless, she managed to last a couple of years there. The men used to do the pressing in this factory (grown men rather than boys.) Women weren’t allowed on the press.

One of the men on the presses said, ‘Come here little girl. See that shed ...go down there and tell him I’ve run out of striped cotton. And I want a bucket of steam.’

Cynthia said, ‘**Down I trots now, and all the girls were laughing at me because they had already been through it. So down I trots now and I said to the mechanic, (he was in**

charge of all of the machines) ‘the man up there has sent me down. Please can I have a reel of striped cotton, and please can I have a bucket of steam’. Of course, he told me and started laughing, and the cat was out of the bag.... I was in tears, because it was new to me. I was a child... It upset me something terrible... But anyway, I got over it.’

00.17.36: She said, ‘We had a ball, we did’.

When she was in Llamas (or it could have been Windsmoor) the girls would take a tin of beans into work for lunch, punch two holes in it, and put it on the steam pipes, and by the time they were ready for dinner they were hot. They would buy a couple of chips and share them out, and pour the beans on top. There were lots of steam pipes because they were steaming everything. They even had an oven into which went pleated skirts. Bamboo stalks would be used to pleat the skirts. The vast majority of the garments made were suits, coats, skirts of every description.

Cynthia had got her job in Llamas through the school. It’s not a job that Cynthia wanted to do really.

00.19.55: Cynthia said, ‘We were never given information of what we could do and couldn’t do... we were young ... I just followed what they told me to do.’

‘We were young, naive, it was a job and it was money’.

After the war, when Cynthia was in school, there was no money about. Her mother used to save her sugar, to go down to the market to get sweets for Christmas. The family needed the money. Some men couldn’t get any work, so the girls would take the job, because the family needed the money.

Cynthia would normally work a Saturday, because it meant earning two shillings a week extra. At the end of the week, Cynthia would give her wage packet to her mother, unopened, and says they didn’t know any different. At Windsmoor a woman called June was the union representative, and the workers put in for a pay rise. They didn’t receive it so she called them all out on strike. They were all sacked, as a result of them going on strike. (There were about seventeen of them out of a total work force of sixty to seventy.)

00.24.25: Cynthia said, ‘We thought we were being big, we were growing up, starting to grow up now, starting to understand who was the joker, who was the good friend.’

Some of the older girls would smuggle drink in at Christmas time. The machines would be turned off instantly by the bosses because an accident could happen. Cynthia said that the Jewish bosses were good to work for but very firm.

00.25.05: ‘When we started off the union we thought we were big.’

During the strike at Windsmoor they were given an ultimatum to go back to work or stay out, and they decided to stay out. The shop stewards were angry but Cynthia and her friends were

not. They thought they were being big and following them. The others who didn't walk out on strike were not members of the union.

00.27.08: 'We went up to Mettoys, and that's when my life began.'

Cynthia worked most of her life at Mettoys. After having children she returned to work there as her mother could look after them. She worked night shift before having children. Her husband asked her to stay home, saying that by the time he had given her cigarettes, money for her dinner, etc there was no point her going to work. Cynthia's husband was ten years older than but he always gave her his pay packet unopened. That was the way they were brought up.

00.29.09: 'Mettoys was the love of my life... It was hilarious. We worked on a team, wonderful girls.'

She was nervous about going down to the bottom shop to work because this is where the fettling was done, and this is where the machines would make the plastic.

She said, 'the doors would shut. I was petrified of it.'

She asked if she could go to the top factory and went to work on the assembly line at the top factory. There would be about ten of them working on the 'belt'. The car that had been fettled would come up from the bottom factory. There would be one putting the tyres on a little axel, there was one riveting, there was one putting the chassis to the wheels. They weren't allowed to go to the toilet, so they would be allowed to smoke in the factory. Cynthia was the last person on the assembly line before the packing stage. She had a mould and would put the car in the mould, and she would pull a handle thereby riveting the chassis to the car. She would then slide the car down a plank of wood until it reached the packing area. She didn't find the work monotonous because sometimes the cars used to come down so fast. Norma Neavis, the shop steward was charge hand of Cynthia's team, and would come and help her if they were coming down too quickly. For the last hour of the shift they would all go down to the packing area together and pack, and in that way they would make their bonus.

Cynthia felt as if she had more freedom in Mettoy's than she'd had at Windsmoor. There were two big factories together with about one thousand five hundred workers. There was the moulds, the fettling, the paint shop.

Cynthia is the first to admit that she didn't always do a good job at Mettoys, but it didn't seem to matter how many mistakes she made, they always kept her on.

The factory worked in such a way that the workers could only do their own job, and not other people's jobs. Because of this set up, Cynthia had to promise she would turn up when she was offered Saturday work. She would turn up, but usually half an hour late and then her pay would be docked.

Cynthia remembers one friend from Gorseinon who had been working at Mettoys for twenty years was sacked. Mettoy's were making toy rockets to recommend men landing on the moon. Cynthia didn't like the production of this item. They had to placed upright in a tall

mould. When they were riveted they would mark. Most of them had to be remoulded and re-done. One day somebody brought in some kittens, and Cynthia said she would take them home for her mother. Cynthia mentions that employees were searched, randomly by security. She also mentions that they had a shop selling seconds very cheaply and therefore there was no need to steal items. One day, Cynthia was searched. She opened her bag to reveal the kittens! They laughed about the kittens. Her friend came out hiding something under her coat. She froze. But she had to open her coat and revealed that she had one of the rockets tucked behind her belt. She was instantly dismissed after twenty years service. The friend was in her fifties or sixties at the time.

They had targets in Mettoys but as long they got their work done the bosses tolerated a lot of horseplay. There were new products every week – there were Corgis, the rockets, different-shaped cars that would come out every week.

The girls would ask Cynthia which ships had come into the docks, and Cynthia would say that she would have a look through the window because she would be able to see the funnel of the ship if she went upstairs, for example, an orange funnel meant there was a Swedish ship (and therefore Swedish sailors!), yellow would be Norwegian, black and blue would be Liverpudlian, brown would be from Bristol. They would then decide to meet in the Ivy Bush that evening, and have fun.

Cynthia left because her aunt owned a cafe on the beach. Her aunt also had the dockers' cafe in Wind Street. This is how Cynthia met her husband, although Cynthia was already engaged to another man. She then went to work in Fine Fayre. She got married when she was at Fine Fayre. She returned to Mettoys to work the night shift but after a few weeks her husband complained that he was paying her to go to work, as she wasn't bringing any money home. Cynthia's husband was a long distance lorry driver, and he would drop Cynthia and her mother off at work.

The girls who worked at Mettoys were from different places – Llanelli, Swansea, Townhill, Penlan – June who was shop steward was from Rose Hill in the Uplands.

Cynthia praises the work at the factory because she considers that there was flexibility there, and the girls 'were in it together'. She remembers a visit from a popular singer at the time called Cy Grant. As a result the workers had the afternoon off. Cynthia found the bosses in Mettoys fairer than at Llamas and Windsmoor. One woman called Nancy lost her hand in one of the machines and was given a light job for life. She was also given compensation money. This was the job that Cynthia didn't want to do because she knew what had happened to this woman. She never went back to the bottom factory after the accident, but was put in charge of everything in the top factory.

00.52.50: 'Every job has its danger if you don't do as you're told.'

Cynthia told her bosses that she would leave before being put back on those machines.

There were plenty of rules and regulations to follow, one of which was always pull the guard down on machines, never put your hand inside the machine until the guard has gone completely back.

According to Cynthia, bad language was rarely used in the factory. She wasn't afraid of anybody at Mettoy's – from the charge hands to the bosses. According to Cynthia they didn't watch the workers in the way they had at Windsmoor.

00.57.05: 'They weren't on your back.'

In Cynthia's opinion, Llamas was the worst place because the Jewish bosses would watch the workers all the time.

00.57.20: She said, 'In Llamas, was the worst factory of all, because from the time you walked in to the time you finished you'd have one of the Jews who was in charge, a foreman walking around all the time, watching you, watching you, watching you all the time.'

'We were their dogsbodies. We were there to do the work. We never had too much of it in Windsmoor, and there was none of that in Mettoy's.'

00.58.20: 'If I had any advice to give to anybody, if that factory [Mettoy's] was still open, I would always tell them go and work in Mettoy's.'

It was mainly women working in the factory. There weren't many men there, and they were mainly the bosses, and they were Jews.

Mr Spiddell was the boss in Windsmoor and he went and bought the Copper Grill in [Swansea] town. "They" say that if a Jewish person robs a company, they are given three chances. The Copper Grill was his last chance, and he went out one day and blew his brains out in the Mumbles.

They didn't do collections for people who were leaving, and they didn't buy birthday cards for each other. Jobs such as charge hand jobs were few and far between and only became available if somebody left. Cynthia doesn't remember having regular pay rises.

00.01.38: 'She said, 'You had to fight for everything you had.'

Cynthia went on strike in Mettoy's many times, but was always taken back. The strikes were never over working conditions but never over money. They were sometimes successful. Union membership was optional. June Roberts who they had followed into a strike in Windsmoor's, and to employment in Mettoy's was also shop steward there.

They didn't get any perks for working in the factory.

Cynthia remembers coming home drunk from work at Christmas in a coal lorry. There were six of them.

After working in Mettoy's, Cynthia went on to work in a fish and chip shop. A friend has asked her to fill in as a favour, and she was there for twelve years. By the time, her husband had had a coronary and was taken off long distance lorry driving and put on day shift. Her

friend had asked her if she wanted work while she was away in Italy. Cynthia had replied that she could not work in a fish and chip shop as she couldn't count, and she would be clueless. But she tried it for a week, and stayed for twelve years. She loved it.

In most factories it was shut down on the last working day before Christmas. All the machines would be shut down because had there been an accident they would have been liable.

In Cynthia's experience there was never any quarrelling or fighting that you might get today. Many of the school girls from the same class would go to one factory, and they were brought up in a different manner to children today. If somebody did something wrong years ago a policeman would give you a 'crack' across the face, or head. Cynthia used to steal apples, and would always get a crack.

In the factory, if there was a charge hand working with you, they were the boss. When the girls worked together to pack during the last ten minutes of a shift, she would be making money not only for herself but also for the other girls. Cynthia doesn't remember having a cross word in all the years she worked there.

Cynthia was never given a uniform to go to work. She wore old clothes to work. The charge hands, nevertheless, wore white coats, and that was to show that they were superior.

Music would be played in the factory, and the girls would sing along as they worked. Permission was required to go to the toilet, because once that person has gone off the line five or ten minutes is wasted, and the line stretched down through ten or twelve people.

01.10.50: She said, 'I have never known jealousy or spitefulness or being vicious or reporting, or anything like that. We never had it.

01.01.21: 'I suppose, based on it being open now, there would be conditions that people didn't like... But we were used to it. We never knew any different. We were used to it. We got on with it, end of story. All we were concerned about was going in, doing a day's work, coming home, dressing up and going out. End of story. And getting up the following morning, and doing exactly the same and getting a bit of extra money.

Cynthia used to buy cigarettes behind the counter in the factory. It cost two pence for three cigarettes.

During her time at Mettoy's, Cynthia had her ears pierced sitting on the toilet. One of the girls used a needle and a bar of soap. She didn't make a sound because she didn't want to be called a baby. After she went home her mother 'battered' her. Her mother said the needle could have been poisoned. Cynthia sat on the toilet to have the piercing done, another girl was minding the door, while another put the needle through a flame.

Cynthia describes how her mother used to 'batter' her with a brush on a regular basis. She would go out to the dances, which finished at eleven o' clock. She would then go on to a Chinese or Indian restaurant which had started opening, with the 'fella' she had met – a

Norwegians, or a Dane perhaps, from one of the docked ships. She wouldn't arrive home until two o'clock in the morning.

Cynthia doesn't think she suffered any long term effects from working in factories, and describes the time as '**the best time of my life**'.

When Cynthia's brother started work at Windsmoor he was lifted up and put on a peg. He returned six years after he'd left the factory and reminded that person of what he'd done to him. He lifted him up and put him on a peg.

00.16.24: Cynthia says of the teasing, 'We took it in our stride.' It was embarrassing but it turned out to be fun.

The other trick that was played on novices in Mettoy's was asking them to get a screwdriver without a blade.

The hours in Mettoy's were seven o'clock until four o'clock (she also says it was half past four). Cynthia would get the trading estate bus and didn't have to pay for it. There would be a break in the morning (for fifteen minutes), with a half hour for dinner. They would have their breakfast while they were working. There was also a fifteen minute break in the afternoon.

There were fourteen days holidays a year. There was no social club – they would 'make their own' and Cynthia would go out with the girls from work every night.

Cynthia left Mettoy's on a foolish whim, with the shop steward, June. They went on strike and she went for a job in Fine Fayre, and it was the biggest mistake of her life. She realised along a few of the others that it was a big mistake.

It seems that colleagues went their separate ways after leaving the factory.

01.24.00: Of Mettoy's Cynthia says, 'There was fairness there, there was togetherness there. We were all a team.... You enjoyed going to work.'