

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/ LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI

Hancock's Brewery, Swansea (from circa 1947 for approximately 17 years)

Interviewee: VSW056 Catherine Anne Jones (“Kitty”)
Date of birth: 3.2.1930
Date of interview: 29.4.14
Interviewer: Susan Roberts on behalf of Women's Archive Wales

Kitty was born in Thomas Row in Swansea and moved up to Townhill when she was about sixteen or seventeen. She has lived ‘on the hill’ since. She went to Dyfatty School which got bombed, so she then went to Hafod School. She was fourteen when she left school. This was during the war. She was the second eldest of six children. Her father was away, so she had to go out to work. Her father was in the army, so they didn't really see him for years. She had one brother – who was the eldest – and four sisters. Her brother and younger sister are dead. The remaining four do everything together.

She looked forward to leaving school, although after leaving she felt a bit sorry to have left. She didn't have a job to go to but jobs were easy to come by. Her first job was in a laundry. She worked from eight o'clock in the morning to six o'clock in the evening, Monday to Friday, and eight o'clock to one o'clock on a Saturday. She earned seventeen shillings and thruppence. She got fed up one day, and went to give one hour's notice. Her mother went ‘ballistic’ when she told her. She went to work in the order office of a brewery. Her husband also worked there. (This is where they met.)

The laundry was opposite the Bay View Hotel. Her work involved putting markers on the clothes, sheets, handkerchiefs, etc. There were many girls working there, a lot of them being as young as Kitty. There was one woman working there who was in her eighties – ironing. She also worked there eight to six o'clock.

00.05.42: ‘Leaving there just come like that – spur of the moment.’

She would give her wages to her mother, and her mother would give her three shillings pocket money. It then went up to five. After a while she told her mother that she was going to keep her pay packet and buy her own clothes, and give her mother some money for her keep. Her mother went ‘ballistic’ with this arrangement.

The brewery was called Hancock's, which was the main brewery in Swansea, and was situated in Wind Street. Kitty's friend was already working there. She finished in the laundry on a Thursday and she started in the brewery on the following Monday.

00.06.47: ‘That’s the way it was then. You could walk in and out of jobs, you know.’

She had an interview at the brewery but what she had to learn, she learnt from the other people already working there. She was about seventeen years old when she started there. (You had to be over sixteen to work at the brewery.)

The brewery was situated in Little Wind Street, and was a three storey building. The order office was in this building although the main office was in Wind Street. All the lorry drivers were men, and there were men working in the office. The women in the factory would do the bottling. The women would put the boxes of bottles in the elevator and they would go up to different floors – the first floor was flagons and pints, the top floor was half pint bottles, and the middle floor was where they were all stacked up. Kitty’s mother was relatively happy that she’d found a job at the brewery, and knew that Kitty wasn’t a drinker so didn’t have any worries about her getting drunk.

00.10.05: ‘She would have flattened me if I had, because she never drank anyway.’

The money was better at the brewery, although Kitty can’t remember the exact amount. (She thinks it was approximately twenty five shillings.) Kitty would dress smartly for work. The girls in the factory wore canvas aprons, and for some of the jobs there they had to wear clogs. The hours were roughly eight o’clock to five o’clock, Monday to Friday and Saturday morning.

They had some nice social evenings there because as well as the Swansea factory there was a Hancock’s in Cardiff, and in Newport too. They would have dinner dances, and they would go to the King Arthur in the summer, and workers from the other factories would come down. There was a welfare officer and he/she would do that.

There were about twelve people working in the office, who were all girls. She was glad to get a job in the office but would have done a bottling job if that was all that was available. If Kitty’s friend wasn’t working there Kitty would probably have gone to look for a job somewhere else.

The other girls were from all over Swansea such as Port Tennant and Townhill. Kitty lived in town at the time. Kitty would catch a bus to work as she lived in High Street, and the bus cost a penny. She would sometimes go home at lunch times. (She would have an hour for lunch time.) There would be a mid-morning and mid-afternoon break. There wasn’t a canteen as such there but in the actual brewery they had an actual mess room, with two people working there. You could take something in for your lunch and they would cook it. During the break they would ask if anybody wanted anything and go and get cakes from the cake shop around the corner. Kitty thinks that they were good employers. There was one man in the office who would send Kitty out to do his shopping. Kitty didn’t mind at all.

They brewed bitter, mild and strong beer in the factory. They would send beer down to West Wales with different labels on it. (Kitty can’t remember what was on the labels.) She didn’t need qualifications to do the job she was doing, she just needed to be sensible.

When she went on social evenings with the factory, they all went as one – office and factory workers. The main office was in Cardiff but there were top managers in the brewery in Swansea, and they also went to the social evenings. Evening dress wasn’t required but they did dress up for them. She would always buy something new to wear. They would go to places like the Pier Hotel, and would always have a meal. The brewery paid for the workers. Kitty was courting her husband at the time, and he would also be there. The men would give

the girls their spending money before they went into the bar to drink. They would all come back together half way through the night. Kitty's husband worked on stock control at the factory. When he had first asked her to go out with him she wouldn't go, but after she had decided that she liked him, he didn't ask her to go out with him again for ages.

In the factory itself all the workers got to learn all the jobs. There were young and older women working at the factory. There weren't many married women working there. It was after the war and the men were returning and needed jobs. Kitty thinks she was earning about twenty five shillings a week when she first went there. Her brother was working for the American Red Cross in Swansea. When her sisters came out of school, one of them came to work in Hancock's.

At Christmas time every worker would be given a turkey. Kitty would be given one, and her husband would be given one so she would give hers to her mother. She was at Hancock's for about thirty years. (She didn't get married until she was about thirty years old and had a very long courtship.)

There was no union there when Kitty first started, and when the workers did join a union, they were more or less 'chucked out'. They were all outside on the steps, and worried that they wouldn't be able to go on their annual outing to London that September. The situation cooled down and the company accepted the union in the end. (This would have been about 1948/50.) The union secured a pay rise for them straight away. There were never any problems after the initial reluctance of the company to accept the union. Kitty paid union membership every week. Somebody would collect membership money every week.

They had to clock in and clock out at the factory. Kitty's hours were the similar to the hours of the girls on the factory floor. (Kitty started an hour later than the girls on the factory floor who started at eight o'clock.) They finished work at five o'clock. Kitty also worked nine o'clock to twelve o'clock on a Saturday as well. There was no shift system at the factory.

Smoking was allowed in the mess room. Some people working in the factory got some bad cuts as some of the bottles would burst when they came out of the pasteuriser. There was a first aider but more often than not they would be sent to the hospital. There was no compensation but workers would be paid for the time they were off work.

Stealing was a sackable offence.

00.27.57: 'It's surprising how many people used to steal beer... Once there was, we all knew that the bags were going to be searched. There was one woman who said Wfft, and she still walked out with it in her bag. She was sacked on the spot, obviously. It had to be something pretty serious to be sacked.'

Workers could buy beer at cost price. There was a lot of pilfering going on in the factory.

00.29.16: 'I remember one woman – she was only that size – every night going out of there she'd be going out like this [drunk]... I think the other girls all protected her.'

The girls in the factory used to clean their own bits, and it was a clean factory. It was wet in the bottling area. The bottles would be put upside down on a conveyor and go through a wash, so that was contained. In the actual bottling area, sometimes a bottle would be dropped, and that would smash. The facilities in places like the mess room and toilets were very clean. Music wasn't played in the factory, although it was played in the mess room and there would be sing songs there (even when music wasn't played.)

00.32.11: ‘They used to sing, even without the music they used to sing... The forewoman in the brewery in the factory, like, she was white haired, and she used to sit there, and she used to love them to sing Calon Lan... She was English she was, but she loved them to sing Calon Lan.’

Her job was sitting there and watching that everything went well on the factory floor. Up the top, on the bottling floor, there was a foreman. This wasn't as big as the bottling on the ground floor. Half pints were bottled on the top, but on the bottom it was flagons.

It was quite noisy but not exceptionally so, and they were allowed to chat. There was a head in every department.

00.33.56: ‘As long as you were doing your work, as long as your job was being done, she was quite happy about it.’

The men and the women in the factory got on very well.

00.34.33: ‘There was a lot of marriages... There was me and I think about four or five friends of us friends, and the five of us married people there. My sister worked there, her husband worked there.’

The brewery changed its name to Welsh Brewers later on, although they haven't got a factory in Swansea now.

00.35.24: ‘There was always a good atmosphere, always a good atmosphere. You know, the lorry drivers, they'd always be shouting things out to you. ...There was never much aggro.’

Kitty got to know everybody in the factory. When she got married, she carried on working until she got pregnant. She had her son, Michael, three years after she got married. When Kitty went back to work, her sister looked after her son. Her sister had six children, so there was no chance that she would be going back to work.

She worked until she was about six months pregnant. She missed the job after she'd left. She missed the friendship and the camaraderie. Even after she'd left work she used to meet up with the other girls.

Kitty could choose when she had her holidays, although the oldest employees would have priority. Once, Kitty had asked for the first two weeks in September, and her friend who had been there longer than her decided that she wanted the same time off. She had priority over Kitty.

There was no shut down in the factory over the summer. The factory would only be shut for Christmas Day and Boxing Day. They would finish early on Christmas Eve and be in the pub by lunch time. They would also be off on Good Friday, Easter Monday, Whitsun Bank Holiday and August Bank Holiday, and would be paid for these days.

The bus that Kitty got to work was not a work's bus but a South Wales Transport Bus.

There was an annual trip to London every September organised by the Welfare Officer. The trip was free but they did collect money so that they would have spending money for it. They went to Battersea Park one year, and there were thousands of people there. She won a doll on one of the stall and she was bringing it home for her niece. One of the men wanted to buy it from her but she refused. They would go up to London on a special train, which would pick

up other Hancock's employees in Cardiff and Newport. They would all have a meal together in London, and then go their own way, although they would bump into each other in Battersea Park anyway. They would also go to a show in the evening and get the specially commissioned train home.

Kitty enjoyed the social side of the factory. The men had a football team, and a cricket team, and Kitty would go and watch as her husband played both. They would play down in Ashley Road. The women had a baseball team. Kitty tried this but couldn't catch a ball, so they wouldn't have her on the team.

The factory had a welfare room next door to the pub, where they had many 'do's'. If the workers from Cardiff were coming down for a game of cricket, for example, they would lay on a bar in the welfare room.

Kitty worked at Hancock's for seventeen or eighteen years.

When somebody got married at the factory, the men would go out but the women wouldn't.

Kitty sums up her time at Hancocks:

00.48.57: 'I enjoyed every minute of it. Great people, great people to work with, and I met my husband there.'