

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/ LLEISIAU O LAWR Y FFATRI

Christmas worker at Mettoys, Fforestfach in 1947

Louis Marx, Fforestfach, from 1948 – 1954 (and part-time from circa 1959)

Interviewee: VSW059 Hilda Glenys Rees (maiden name Emmett)
Date of birth: 24.7.1932
Date of interview: 30.5.14
Interviewer: Susan Roberts on behalf of Women's Archive of Wales

Glenys was born in Fern Street in Swansea. Glenys's father was from Liverpool and was a fisherman. During the war he was in the Merchant Navy. He was on the trawlers and came to Swansea with two of his friends and went to live in Prince of Wales Road.

Her mother worked as a domestic in Mountpleasant Hospital (when she was married.)

Glenys is the eldest of three sisters. She lost a brother when he was one year and eight months old due to meningitis. Her mother was pregnant with her youngest sister when Glenys was pregnant with her first child and when the babies were born there were only six days between them.

She went to Waunwen Infants school. Her grandfather from Liverpool mistakenly thought this was a Chinese School. She enjoyed her school days and left when she was fourteen. It was just after the war and there was really no alternative.

Glenys and her friend went into town to look for a job at the Windsor Cafe on the Kingsway. Her friend was really tall, whereas Glenys is short, and the manager gave her friend the waitress job and gave Glenys a job in the kitchen.

When Glenys went home and told her father he said he wouldn't allow her to work in the kitchen. Glenys had wanted to be a hairdresser. There was a hairdresser's shop a few doors down from where they lived and her mother wanted to pay a premium for Glenys to train there. All Glenys's friends were going into factories, as this was when the factories started up down in Fforestfach. Working in a factory was an attractive proposition because training as a hairdresser wouldn't have paid much money, and that drew her down there.

00.06.04: She said, 'That was the only regret I got. I never went in for my apprenticeship.... My mother had the money, she wanted me to do it, but I changed my mind because all my friends were going into the factory, and I followed them, you know,

which I regret today. Friends are important to you at that age, and you're a bit shy. You wanted to be with people you knew.'

Glenys didn't go to the cafe, but went to work in a wholesale grocer's shop by St Mary's church. Her job was packing food. She enjoyed the work and was there for about a year. She was packing flour, and her father and sister paid her a visit one day. She went down stairs to see them and there was flour in her hair. He asked her what she'd been doing and she explained that she'd been packing flour. He told her she needed to give her notice immediately, because he was afraid the dust from the flour would affect her chest. Her employer didn't provide a mask or any protective clothing.

She gave in her notice and a few of her friends were going down to Mettoys. It was around Christmas time and she got a job there for the Christmas rush. Her father went down to Mettoys with her for her interview. It was a big place. She worked in the Assembly and enjoyed the work. After the Christmas rush the job came to an end. She hadn't realized that the job was only temporary when she applied – they hadn't told her.

The Louis Marx factory was opening at the bottom of Bruce Road in Fforestfach, and they were taking on staff. Down in Ystrad Road, there was a little shed where they were recruiting. Glenys and her friends walked down and put their names down. She got an interview and started there in the March. (She can't remember the year but it must have been 1948 as this was the year that the factory opened in Swansea.)

During the interview for the Louis Marx job she was asked why she had finished at Mettoys, and whether or not she had been sacked. She was given the job and felt a bit nervous when she started. After all, she was still only fifteen.

Glenys remembers her first day at Louis Marx. She caught a bus at the Mile End, which took her right outside the factory. Everything was new, because it was a new factory. It was quite a walk to the entrance. She had to clock in on arrival. There was somebody there telling her and the others what to do. There was a cloak room, where she had to put her coat. She was with a group of others, so she didn't feel alone.

There was a charge hand on each belt, who showed them what to do. The work wasn't difficult, in Glenys's opinion.

Work started at seven thirty in the morning and finished at five in the afternoon. They had a break in the morning but had to stay at the side of their belts. A tea urn would come around. Girls who smoked would go down to the toilet for a cigarette.

Glenys would leave the house at approximately a quarter to seven in the morning to get to work. She lived with her parents in Gendros Avenue East so she used to walk along Gendros Crescent and cross the road by the Mile End (pub) and catch the bus.

After arriving at work she would clock in using the card which bore her number. Her number was 312.

00.16.25: 'They say factory workers were rough but I made lovely friends in the factory...'

00.17.08: ‘There was like the typing, short-hand typing in offices and you felt that they were a little bit above you, and you shouldn’t feel like that really.’

00.17.27: ‘The only thing that I was annoyed about, in the canteen, and I had a big issue about this, in the canteen there was one side for all the factory girls, one section, and there was another section by the window, a row for the office workers, and the canteen staff put table clothes for the office workers but not for us. I could understand, I suppose we were dusty, with machinery and things, but they had table clothes and I thought that was awful.’

Several of the other girls felt the same and thought this was unfair.

The charge hands and foremen were mostly men and came from Dudley, which is where the factory had been established, so they had moved to Swansea. Everybody was issued with overalls. The charge hands wore suits. They did have brown overalls which they would wear if they had to show somebody how to do something.

Glenys wouldn’t be in the same place in the factory all the time, because a line of toys would finish, and she would be put on something else then. When she first started there, they were making pop guns. She also made Daleks. She had a drill and would have to drill holes into the Daleks. She wouldn’t necessarily be working with the same people all the time.

Glenys could chat as long as she was working.

00.20.59: ‘If you saw the foreman coming, you put your head down, but when they were out of sight, everybody was chatting. But as I said as long as you were working and getting your number out, what you had to do that was okay.’

It was piece work at the time. They would have a time and motion man standing over you, watching you, timing how long a job took. The target would be based on this.

Glenys thought that the pay was good. They would receive bonuses on top of their wages which boosted their money. Pay day was a Friday when they would bring the brown envelopes round. Glenys would give her mother her pay packet, and then her mother would take money for lodgings money. Glenys would spend the rest on clothes, as she used to love to go out dancing. She would go to the Patt Pavillion, and the YMCA. C & As came to Swansea and she loved buying clothes there.

When she was at Louis Marx, Glenys felt glad to be in a job, and she enjoyed the work. She was there for six years, until she got pregnant with her eldest daughter. She says that in those days if you could work for six months you could have maternity benefit. She said her employers were ‘lovely’ to her. They put her on Inspections which was a relatively easy job.

Most of the girls working there were from the local area. The bus she caught to work in the mornings was the factory bus, which would be waiting to take them home in the evenings. The bus would also pick up people from Mettoys occasionally. Glenys said of travelling on the bus,

00.25.33: ‘We used to have a whale of a time, and sing. We used to sing songs.’

The morning break was at about ten o'clock in the morning. After the Factory Act came in they weren't allowed to work more than four hours without a break. There was a union there when Glenys started and she became a member of it. The payment for union membership came directly out of her wages. The factory had a glass roof, and they had several hot summers during the time that Glenys was there. If the factory got too hot, the union would stop everything. All the machines would be switched off and everybody would go outside the factory. In the winter, the factory was cold because it was built on a stone floor.

Glenys enjoyed the variety offered by working on different toys.

'They say factory work was boring. Well, some jobs were but when you changed then, it was a different outlook again then, you know.'

It was mainly girls working on the belts there at the time. They would chat about boys, and clothes. There were boys working there in the press shop and the 'mech' (mechanical) shop. Men would bring them the materials they were working on. There were many marriages between people working there. There were social evenings and dances when workers got together.

There were a few people in the office who used to play the band in the YMCA, and they would play the band for them in the factory. They would have to pay a certain amount to go in as there were refreshments on offer. The canteen staff would put on drinks and something to eat. They also had a football team, and a netball team. (Glenys thinks she remembers a darts team being there as well.)

There were several hundred people working there. They made little dinky cars there, little horse and cart toys. One of the jobs that Glenys had to do was painting the front of a toy car, complete with head lights, by hand. That job was quite tedious.

As they went on to work on a different toy, they would be shown what to do by the charge hand or the foreman. When they started on a new belt, somebody would come and time them working, and tell them how many they had to do in an hour. They didn't always agree on the numbers. Some workers would work slower when the time and motion man came along. If somebody thought the numbers were too high they would tell them, and be told to try and do as many as possible. Glenys thinks they were fair employers.

Glenys would have a pay rise every twelve months. Toys were discounted for workers who wanted to buy them. It was an American firm. The directors of the company would come down and walk around the factory. The floor would be swept, and everything would be clean before such a visit. They never talked to the directors.

The girls were responsible for keeping their own area clean and tidy. The charge hands and the foreman ensured everything was okay. The relationship between the charge hands and the girls was very good. If anybody had an issue they would tell them.

The foremen had a little office which overlooked all the belts, watching all the time. **'It was like Big Brother.'**

00.38.53: 'I remember my dad. He was a fisherman and he'd come home from sea, and he would bring fish. And he'd bring prawns. And I'd took a little box of prawns one day into work and we were all sitting on the belt. So I said, "I've got prawns here." So

we were handing them down to the belt and he came along the belt and he was going (SHE SNIFFS), and he could smell the fish, and he didn't know what it was. And we were hiding them.... And he couldn't make out where this fishy smell was coming from. We were wicked sometime, but there we are that was the fun of it.'

Glenys remembers somebody clocking in on somebody else's behalf one day – the one clocking in for somebody who was late arriving. Both workers were dismissed.

When she worked at Mettoys she was working with a drill. She was wearing gloves and hadn't switched her machine off. She went to turn it off and her glove caught in the drill which was going around. 'You had to be very careful. You had to have your wits about you.'

When she was at Louis Marx, she had a piece of something go into her eye and had to go down to Singleton hospital to have it removed. It was extremely painful. She was taken down to the hospital by taxi.

There was a nurse and a welfare officer working at the factory. If somebody had any personal problems such as money problems, or family problem, they could go to him.

00.42.09: 'Everybody was out for each other, not like they do today. Everybody was helping one another. I learnt a lot from working in a factory... How to deal with people and how to get over problems, and things like that, because you talked to each other. And think that was a big thing, because that's what's lacking today. People get nervous breakdowns and things because there's nobody to talk to. In a factory it was very close knit, like a family.'

Glenys is still in contact with people she worked with at Louis Marx.

There would be Security people there watching people by the gate as they left the factory.

00.43.45: 'Even if you hadn't taken anything you felt guilty.'

There were a lot of people trying to get things out of the factory but there was Security there all the time. Sometimes, they would pick somebody out and search them. Glenys remembers a girl being caught trying to take a pop gun out of the factory.

00.44.25: 'It was silly. When you could buy them, and they were cheaper.'

She was sacked.

The canteen was nice and clean, and provided a good cooked dinner. It was subsidised and so meals were reasonably priced. Glenys's mother worked in the canteen.

00.45.47: 'The language was quite strong – they were like men you know.. But some were really butch, and really you know would swear. And that would give a wrong impression of factory girls then you know.'

One of the rules was if you were three minutes late, you would be docked a quarter of an hour out of your wages. Sometimes, the bus would be late, and they would go to the charge hand and explain, who in turn would go to the foreman who would sort it out with the office.

They had a tannoy system and music would be played over this. The girls would sing along.

‘It was a lovely atmosphere. And I remember when I worked at Mettoys, they turned all of the machinery off, and it was the time the Duke of Edinburgh and the Queen got married. And all the machines went off and they had it all on the tannoy. And they were saying their wedding vows. And you can imagine everybody, Ahhhh, you know, and all this.’

‘Another time in Louis Marx, we all had to stand when the King died. We had to have one minute’s silence in the whole factory. Everything went off.’

Glenys remembers standing to the national anthem when she was in the cinema.

00.51.00: Glenys was quite shy when she started working in the factory. ‘I wouldn’t say peepo to a goose. But it brought me out, it done me good because you had to be the same as them.’

There would be banter between the women and the men who would bring them their materials. If somebody young started you would take them under your wing. The older women would take care of any young girls starting there, and show them what to do.

The working week was Monday to Friday, but if extra work needed doing to complete an order over-time would be available on a Saturday, and would pay double time. There would be a fortnight’s holiday every year during the last week in July and the first week in August, when the factory would shut down. Some girls went on holiday together. Bank Holidays were paid holidays also.

Glenys remembers going to a Louis Marx Christmas party at the Brangwyn Hall in Swansea.

She enjoyed her time at the factory and made lovely friends there. The down side was when the weather was bad. It would be cold in the factory in the winter. Sometimes they wouldn’t be able to get the bus, and would have to walk there.

Work was plentiful, so if somebody didn’t like work in one factory they could move on to another. Nearby, there was Windsmoor’s clothing factory, or Hodges. Glenys was never tempted to seek employment in one of the other factories.

When Glenys was leaving, pregnant with her first child, the girls collected for her. She was crying when she left because she had been there for so long.

When Glenys’s daughter started school she went back to Louis Marx on a part-time basis, from nine o’clock to three o’clock. There was also evening work available there then. Many of the women who had babies came back to work on a part-time basis.

Glenys worked in Smith’s Crisps for a short period before going back to Louis Marx. They were starting an evening shift in Smith’s Crisps. Her husband worked on the railway at the time, and would come home at four thirty in the afternoon, so he would come home and she would be going out to work.

00.02.43: ‘I was a bit frightened at the beginning, because they put me on this machine, with the crisps coming down. And there was like a chute underneath, so if you didn’t catch the crisps, the crisps would go down the chute. Well they’d re-use them. Until I got into the pattern of picking the salt up, picking the bag up, but it was funny that was.’

She was therefore packing the bags, which would go along the belt to the next girl who would check them, and seal them. Somebody else would have a box and would pack them. One of the men would come for the boxes and take them out to the packing area, in order for them to go to the shop. At the beginning Glenys thought she would never get into it. She was only there for a few months before returning to Louis Marx. She would need a bath every evening after returning from the crisp factory because she would smell of crisps.

01.05.03: 'In the end you do it automatically, you just pick up one, pick up the other, and put it in the machine, and the crisps would come down and then you put it on the belt. But you had to be like a robot... It was boring. And that's all it was. There was no going on to another belt.'

Glenys says of her time at Louis Marx, 'I would say I was very happy there. And I made a lot of friends. It was a good time of my life that was, yeah. We had fun.'