

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/ LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI

London Transformers, Bridgend Industrial Estate (1966)

Interviewee: Keith Battrick

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Interviewer: Catrin Stevens on behalf of Women's Archive of Wales

Keith confirmed his name and address and his date of birth November 24th, 1949.

Background: He was brought up in a little village called Treoes on the edge of the Vale of Glamorgan, between Bridgend and Cowbridge, and he spent his early years there. He went to primary school in LLangan and then he went on to Llanharry Secondary School.

His father was a lorry driver and then went to work in the concrete works Costins in Bridgend. His mother was a cleaner in the Police Headquarters in Bridgend. He has two brothers, both younger, one by ten years and one by five years. He had to look after them.

He left school at 16, he didn't want to leave but he wanted to have an apprenticeship. He did his GCSEs at Llanharry and after finishing those he left school and tried to get an apprenticeship at Bridgend. He wanted to be a tool maker so he got a job in London Transformers and went straight in there from school. He started there as an improver, learning different skills, making parts for transformers which were sold to the Electricity Board and power stations. This factory was in the Waterton Industrial Estate in Bridgend. He believes they employed about 150 people there – women as well as men. He thinks 75% of the workers would have been men - 25% women.

3.09

Interview? He can't remember exactly, but he remembers going round different factories after he'd left school, and having interviews with people like the County Council, London Transformers and '**there were lots and lots who were recruiting at the time**'. He was told in London Transformers that there would be a place for him, if he wanted it, and he quite liked the idea of getting an apprenticeship to be a tool maker. Initially he was making copper links on the factory floor using a hand press which would be fitted into the transformer to

carry electricity from one part to another and then he had to coat them with a solder. It involved a lot of working with machinery. – lathes and presses and dyes. This job was skilled to an extent, but he wanted it to lead to being able to make the actual tools he was working with themselves. He was sixteen at the time and this was in 1966. He stayed there for three to four months, obviously trying to get an apprenticeship, and at the end there was no chance for him to get it, so he decided to leave and go back to school.

5.12

His first day? He can't remember it especially but it was a matter of being taken around to show him the various processes, and then in subsequent days he was started on the menial tasks like cutting copper strips, into the required lengths. The men and the women were doing different roles in the factory. It was mostly men working where he was, he can't remember what the women were doing on another part of the factory. There was a canteen there and lots of women worked there. He only mixed with the women at lunch times and break times when they used the canteen.

6.35

In some factories they had what were called initiation ceremonies and ... things could happen ...

Yes,

Do you have any recollection of that at all?

Yes, Oh yes, yes, yes a very traumatic experience for someone who is just sixteen, just left school, not particularly worldly wise. I can remember that it was during the first week, it wasn't the first or the second day, but, I can remember during the first week, I was taken by a couple of men, and frogmarched to one part of the factory where there were women and lots of other people gathered around, and this particular ceremony that they did there was they would actually strip you off, and lots of the materials that were used there were – they used grease and sawdust and all sorts – oil, but I was stripped off and then – women were taking part as well – they would smear you with grease around your private parts, and sawdust, and just leave you mmm. I can't remember ever, I can't remember being tied up, but I can remember being just left with obviously everyone making rude remarks and enjoying themselves, I just can remember being left there to fend for myself really and not knowing what to do and eventually finding my way back to the toilets to clean , to try to clean myself up – there were no showers or anything like that. So it was an uncomfortable day, I can remember being very uncomfortable because there was nothing other than paper to clean yourselves up with and to dress again and having to wait then until the end of the day, to go home to obviously clean yourself up.

But apparently that was a common ... just, it was a common ... it was common in lots of the factories there, where they had different ceremonies .. I know that that one was particularly horrible. And I know in some places they used to hold, they used to tie the people and just tie them to a machine so that they couldn't go and they just had to stand there and take whatever came along, whilst they were ... So it was quite a traumatic experience for me – yes.

Certainly for a sixteen year old it was quite abusive wasn't it?

Very, if you look back at it now you would think you know, it would never happen today. But it seemed to be part of the culture then and it was something you had to put up with. You put up with it and then you came in the following day, nobody mentioned it again and it never happened again, only unless some new person started.

So the women were part of it – men and women... ?

Oh women, women took part in it as well – women took delight in actually putting the grease on yea ... so

So what did you wear to work in the factory then? What clothes did you wear?

I had overalls, obviously jeans or whatever underneath and a shirt, T shirt, whatever and then overalls on top so they would all be taken off and yea – that's basically it really.

Did you see any others being treated in such a way?

Yes, anyone new who started, whether they were older or younger, it would happen.

It didn't matter if they were – they didn't have to be young apprentices?

No, no no, it would happen with anyone who actually started within the factory.

What happened to the women? Were they treated in such a way?

I don't remember ever seeing any of the women treated that way but I know it happened to the men and boys, yea. 'Cos there were several boys, there were several boys that were working there at the time, and they all told me that this was going to happen to you, this was going to happen at some point or other. They never said when, but they said 'It will happen to you.' And it had happened to them all.

Oh right. So it was a common ..?

Yea, absolutely common, absolutely common, yea and nobody was left out, but I never saw, maybe because there weren't any new women starting, but I never saw any.

That was a bit unfair wasn't it?

Yea, shame! But I mean ... the most unpleasant thing, I'm not, I don't have any hang ups about bodies and stuff like that, but the worst part of it was afterwards, there was no way of cleaning yourself up, you know, only rudimentary cleaning and then, having to dress on top of that with sawdust and grease together, uncomfortable, really uncomfortable trying to work like that.

When did this happen during the day?

Again I can't remember, I think it was around lunchtime,

Right, so it was a long day after...?

It was a long day – there was an afternoon then to wait yea .. and then trying to explain to your parents why all your clothes were in such a state.

Had they heard of it at all?

Oh, I'm sure they had. My father would have done, because he .. he worked .. he was a man of the world, he must have known that.

He worked in a factory himself didn't he?

... He worked in a concrete yard, but not in a factory. He was a lorry driver, he left the navy to become and he was a lorry driver and he did lots of labouring jobs, you know. So he must have known. Nobody warned me before I went

Would it have made any difference do you think?

Probably not, no. I don't think it would have done. If I'd gone to somewhere like the County Council, or whatever it would never have happened there, there wasn't that sort of culture there, but factories were a bit of a law unto themselves really.

Who owned this company?

I don't know the owners – they were called London Transformers – they were obviously a big company,

It wasn't a Bridgend company was it?

No. no it wasn't local.

But most of the people were local?

Oh yes absolutely.

Were there any people you knew before you went there?

No, no no,

You didn't know anyone in the factory?

No, which helped in a way because if I'd known people there it would have been maybe a little more intrusive like you know.

13.10

Keith goes on to describe how he carried on working there in spite of that, for three and half to four months, and then asked about an apprenticeship, but he was told there was no chance of having one as a tool maker. He could have carried on working there for as long as he wanted but it wasn't what he wanted so he decided to go back to do his A Levels at school. He started back in Llanharry in the autumn of 1966, but in November/December his father had a very bad heart attack and couldn't work, and since he was the main wage earner in the house, (in fact his mother wasn't working then so he was the only wage earner), so he decided to leave school much to his chagrin, because he really enjoyed school, and he went to work in the place where his father was working – they gave him a job – as a steel fixer, - **no initiation ceremonies there – no women worked there and perhaps this explains it;**

'They were egging them on – which is possible because they did have a lot of influence there'

But he didn't like the horrible job as a steel fixer in Costins, - a cold job. In the meantime his mother went to work in the police headquarters and she noticed an advert for an electrician's mate. At the same time he had enrolled in Bridgend Technical College to do an electrical installation course. When he went for an interview he was offered an apprenticeship and were willing to back date it for the year he spent in College. And he's been an electrician ever since, mostly working for himself, but also for other companies. But he never had any similar experience anywhere else.

16.25

He remembers that when he became an apprentice he was earning c. £3 a week, and at the end £19 a week. The actual factory wage was good – because before he left school he had worked for six weeks as a holiday job in Popular Plastics in Bridgend – he was earning something like £5 a week – quite a lot of money then. Apprentice rates were low. Popular Plastic produced plastic toys – he had a very boring job sitting in front of a machine, filling a hopper up with plastic granules and then, pressing a button while – they called it plastic extrusion – the plastic would be fed into the machine, melted and made into (moulded) into parts of toys, and then you had to wait for the machine to open, open the guard, take the plastic out, close it again, shut the guard, press the button – this was it all day. He was not in a line or given a set target a day. You did what you could, there was a bonus system for the experienced workers but not for them. You would need to be there for a while to be able to compete with the workers who had been there for years. There were more women than men in this factory. Not sure what they did. But there were different lines there.

In 1972 he moved down to Pembrokeshire initially because of his now wife Cynthia in Cardiff. He was going to the Aelwyd to learn Welsh with Gwilym Roberts. When he moved down he worked with a company from Bridgend which was rewiring council houses in Milford Haven. He lodged with Cynthia's parents and he never moved back. He tried to learn Welsh in Cardiff but having lived in Pembs most of his life now he's been able to make lots of Welsh friends. **He speaks Welsh but he is obviously more comfortable doing this (interview) in English because it relates to an experience he had when he was English speaking.**

His life now revolves around the Welsh community – he goes to Tabor chapel Dinas, and does their books. Before that he did the books of the Methodist chapel in Bryn Henllan but this had to close. He now has his own business as a self-employed electrician with plenty of work and lots of friends.