

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/ LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI

Corgi Hosiery Ammanford / Rhydaman 1959-2014 ongoing (with home-working from factory too for a period)

Interviewee: VSW065.2 Margaret Young

Date: 3 September 2014

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

This interview was held in the Board Room at the Corgi Factory where Margaret still works, during her working day.

She confirmed that her name is Margaret Young; Beynon was her maiden name and her date of birth 27: 12: 1944.

Her mother didn't work because she had four children, her father worked on the railway. Her brother and two sisters worked in the tin works in Pantyffynnon, and in Pullman's. Her sisters left when they got married.

She attended Parcyrhun Primary school, she didn't sit the scholarship and she went to Amman Comprehensive School. She left school at fifteen 'I wasn't very good in school so ..', the job came up in Corgis so she decided to leave. A careers' lady asked if she'd like to try it and she had an interview for the job but she can't remember much about it. This was in 1959. She's worked for the company for 52-53 years.

Her first day? It was very frightening but the girls were very nice to them, so ...

The size probably was the frightening part. There were about 100 women working there at the time. When she started the factory was on the same site in New Road, Ammanford as it is today. It's an old company (established in 1892).

3.10

They only produced socks when she started – all wool – argyle and army socks. She thinks the company was started to produce army socks. Argyle socks had a complicated pattern. Every stitch had to be put in by hand – every overcheck; 'everything's by hand now' (too).

An older girl was allocated to teach each new worker, there was three month's training. The wool was spun in the far end of the factory, she indicates the bobbins in a photograph – big wooden cones, and they were wound in the old fashioned way on the arms – this is how they came into the factory. It took a 'good few hours' to do one pair of socks. They were given specific targets depending upon on whether it was a four / six or eight diamond pattern – some were to the knee, some to the ankle. In the beginning they mad men's socks mostly.

She did quite enjoy the first day once she'd settled in; '**routine ...we had to put our heads down and that was it**'. She likes working with wool and trying different patterns. They had a little chart to tell them what to do and a ticket with what colours they wanted in the diamond. She always enjoyed sewing and knitting in school.

7.02

Wages? She'd been discussing this with her friend who used to work at Corgis – she thought it was 25s a day – but Margaret thought it was 25s. a week. She was '**on production and if our wages was down it was our own fault, but we – sometimes we had to work through our dinner hour to make up ...**' They couldn't earn a bonus on top of this – they had a wage – it wasn't piece work. '**Cos the more you do the more money you were having, but it was hard going.**' (i.e. to achieve the target set). They worked long days – from 7.20 to 4.20 every day. She could walk to work because she only lived down the road.

Relatives etc working there? – she had a cousin working in the factory but she doesn't think this helped her to get a job there.

She had to give her wages to her mother. If she wanted to go out to the pictures once a week she was given just enough to go to the pictures. Her mother would give her money for any clothes – or her brother because he was a lot older than her. Union fees were not taken out of the wage packet

9.25

'No Union allowed in the factory at all. ... They weren't allowed to put their foot in the factory.' This has been the case throughout the time she has worked at Corgis and is still the case today. Some people have argued against it but '**you wouldn't dare – Mr Jones wouldn't have it.**' The girls that worked there haven't been successful in changing this but next door used to Allen Paine's Knitting factory and they had a union there, so when that factory closed, the girls came to Corgis and they still paid union fees – this has happened in the last ten years. By this time Margaret didn't see the point (of joining).

There have been a number of disputes in the factory – about wages probably. But there weren't any strikes. '**No, no, no, we had arguments but we didn't have strikes.**' The supervisors would represent the workers to talk to the boss.

Explains how the stockings were assembled (using an actual sock / socks to illustrate) – one person would knit the main leg of the sock, and then it went onto another machine to do the toe and then it would be checked, washed, pressed and packed. Before knitting the actual leg it went to a machine that did the welt (i.e. the ribbing). There had to be a ‘waist’ after the welt and then every stitch had to go on to a needle and the leg would be knitted by hand down to the toes. The pattern of some of the socks hasn’t changed at all. The stamp with the name Corgi is put on last before the packing – this hasn’t changed. If the inspection found anything wrong with the sock, it would be sent back and it would have to be re-done but you wouldn’t be paid. This didn’t happen often because they had to be careful.

13.20

The factory was owned by the same family throughout – she worked for Mr Jones, who married into the family and then for his children (?grandchildren) – Christopher and Lisa. The factory has grown during this period because they’ve bought in pullovers, jumpers ... but before that they brought sewing in, making **tapestry clothes** – making skirts out of it. If she didn’t have work on the socks she used to go and help on the sewing. They bought in the tapestry material – in the 1960s. They had to be able to work in all the different sections of the factory and this is the same today. She moved on years ago from making the socks, though she’s been teaching on the socks – showing young girls how to do them and then Huw (member of family – Mr Jones’s son) came back from Switzerland a few months after she started. He’d gone there to learn about the knitwear. And he wanted two girls to start building it up and she went to do the knitting. From hosiery to knitwear. The company produces jumpers, scarves, hats – Lisa is the driving force behind the design of these.

16.30

When it was anyone’s birthday in the factory ‘**Teddington had a factory next door, and if it was anybody’s birthday, and in the factory it used to be – the heating used to be coal, so if it was anybody’s birthday, they used to tie wool in the girl’s hair, and we’d have these trolleys and we used to, or a chair, - ... Teddington’s used to come out from their factory to go into their canteen, and we used to put the girls, tie the girls to the chair and put – all dressed up and black - from the coal to sit there and the boys used to come out of Teddington ... any birthday, we did used to have some fun.**

Teddington’s was an all male factory (unsure what was produced there). She had this done for her on her birthday, – most of them did. This is going back years. She was ‘**embarrassed really but the boys thought it was great.**’ They tied bits of hair all over with wool and put coal over their faces.

At Christmas time they had parties in the canteen. There was a canteen in the factory then – but no longer. Now they have a little place where they just bring their own food. But then they made hot dinners in the canteen – pasties, whatever you wanted. She used to go to the canteen for dinner.

19.01

The factory was VERY cold – ‘we had to work in our coats, and gloves (*indicates half way up her hand*) and scarves, it was a very cold factory.’ Now they have a new roof. They weren’t too hot in summer. The roof was really asbestos and they painted it so that the sun would reflect down upon the workers. **The lighting wasn’t good either. ‘It was hard going.’** All this improved when the gas came in, and now it gets too hot there sometimes.

An ordinary day: They clocked in first and then went straight to their machines. If they were late they’d have a row and they would lose money because they were on production. They had a Foreman then, he was strict and **‘he used to sit by the toilet, he had a desk by the toilet, and he used to sit and he used to time us to go to the toilet, and if we were too long he used to knock on the door.’** They could go to the toilet any time but they couldn’t spend any time in there! **They used to pool together to have music on the factory floor, - records and they all used to put something in and buy a record every week. ‘One girl was allowed to go and put it on.’ e.g. Tom Jones, Cliff Richard and Elvis. The record player was in the canteen but they had speakers into the factory. ‘Oh yes, we used to sing. We could sing – Christmastime – can’t do any of that now though.’** They were allowed to talk when they worked, **‘but you see, when you are counting, - you had to count sometimes you know, you had to concentrate. If you were doing the foot, it was sometimes plain, you had to count the rows as you go around, so you couldn’t really talk.’** They had a break at ten o’clock – a cup of tea in the canteen and then back to work straight away, - quarter of an hour break; half an hour for dinner and then a break of ten minutes in the afternoon, about three – half three. Then they clocked out at the end of the day. At the end of the factory they’ve got an old old press that presses the socks. **‘Rainford we used to call the Foreman - he used to stand there then until the bell went, and if we got up before the bell went ...’.** When the bell went – ‘you had weights to hold the sock down, once you’d taken the weights off you could go home.’ They were very strict but ‘we had fun, you know. We did have fun.’

23.47

When she was on the socks there was only the Foreman, Rainford in charge. A man in charge of all women. Two / three other men worked there - one disabled boy and two other with the packing. She worked in each section and learned all the different jobs in the factory. This is the same now.

There weren’t many accidents – the needles could go into the fingers, she can only remember one accident - on the automatic machines – Margaret (another one) cut her hand badly. No nurse and no major accidents. They had to have a medical before they came in to work there. A doctor came to the factory to do so. She doesn’t think that working in the factory has affected her health in any way.

She wore a trousers and top to work in the early days. But before she started the women wore white uniforms. Now they wear dark blue uniforms – (tabards) of cotton. But before that they didn't provide a uniform for the staff. No mask, or specific shoes or head covering.

Health and Safety has only just come in to the factory – there aren't any windows in the factory itself, (well a few), so they used to keep the doors open but the present managers don't like that. She doesn't know why. Dust is not an issue. The company has changed and it makes socks and jumpers for women now and for children.

27.20

Holidays: they had a fortnight when the colliery closed –last week of July, first week of August. Her first holiday was camping in Oxwich. And then she went to the Isle of Man. She didn't go with the factory girls. She thinks they had a fortnight off Christmas, (like now), Easter, Bank Holidays - the factory would close down. These were paid holidays. In those days Mr Jones (Huw's father) – his brother worked in the factory as well, and his son too (Huw's cousin) **'and he used to have savings. You know they used to take money out of our pay, so that we had quite a bit of money for the holidays.'** She can't remember how it worked exactly.

They had a good relationship with the boss. He was strict and straight. 'I liked him.' He knew the workers – she called him Mr Jones and he would call her 'Margaret'.

She got married when she was 25 – her husband was a carpenter. She didn't leave the factory then. She worked for three years and had a little boy. **She had a machine at home.** This went on until her son started school and then she had the little girl and it all started again. Quite a few other women did this as well. The work was either brought out to them or they came down to see what the bosses wanted. There was no set target then – just what she could do. You were paid for what you did. It was handy because she didn't have baby-sitters. She came back to work once her daughter started full time in school (c. 1975?) – she did part-time work then, 9 til 3.

There wasn't much shift work in the factory – no night shift. But some part time and others full time.

They could buy socks from the factory – there wasn't a shop, but the seconds were kept in boxes on shelves in the factory, and you could go and ask for them. She only remembers one example of a girl caught stealing someone's pay packet, but she thinks they knew who had done it and **she remembers Mr Jones saying 'If you're short of money, you come to ask me, but don't pinch off me. If you want something I'll help you.'** But there was no tradition of pilfering goods.

No tradition of having fun the day before the holidays began. But before Christmas they used to go out straight from work. They used to decorate the factory – trimmings hanging, but they

can't do it now! Because of the electric and things. But they used to have trimmings everywhere from the lights, a Christmas tree.

33.50

Drink? **'If it was cold here, and we used to bring some whisky in, because it was so cold, we used to have a break, ... we used to have a drop of whisky in tea, so that it would warm us up to come out to the factory – The bosses didn't know, mind!'** **'On a Friday then if it was holiday time, like Christmas, we used to, some of the girls used to do their own brew, and we'd start at ten o'clock in the morning then – by the time we were finished then ... Friday before Christmas'** The factory used to run trips, to have a lunch at Christmastide.

Also **strawberry picking on a Saturday, with their children or to Hereford.** Before she started in the factory they used to go to Ilfracombe and other places but she didn't. There wasn't a social club associated with the factory – no facilities for recreation.

At its busiest she remembers 100 women working on the factory floor – now there are 60+ there. There were problems on the sock side of the production at one time, only two girls work on the old type of socks now. They are wool and very expensive socks.

No children's parties Christmas time. And none of her children have followed her into the factory. At the time she considered her wage **'as extra money'** not that she was the main bread winner. They bought the house and they saved to do it up.

The toilets and facilities in the early years were clean but very old fashioned. A cleaner cleaned them and the factory itself was kept clean as well – they used to polish through.

37.40

Smoking? Not allowed to smoke at their work, she doesn't anyway, but you could do so in the toilets. Now they go outside.

Were they treated fairly as workers? **'When Mr Jones was here, yes.'** (laughs)

She was terrified of the Foreman, 'I got on all right with him, but you know I got on with my work, but he used to come round on the Friday then, with a bag, for sweets. He used to go round us all.' The sweets were for him!

If someone didn't do their work properly Mr Jones would have them in the office to tell them. She doesn't remember any one being sacked. A lot of the workers were older than her. Another girl started at the same time as her but she thinks the other girl left. During the time she's been in the factory more men have joined the workforce – now there are about 10-11 men working there but they're in another part of the factory. There are three on the factory floor at the moment but they're pressing on their own over in ... There was some teasing –

there's a young boy from Remploy – 'Oh yes, the boys are teased' by the young girls out there – she doesn't tease them.

Rough language? No, only one or two, and only very rarely when something has gone really wrong.' There were Welsh speakers in the factory, and there were no problems with them speaking the language. She understands Welsh.

41.57

Thinking back over the years what stays in her memory? **'I think it was just the company, and you know, we used to have such fun, and everybody helped each other in those days.'** If someone got married – they used to have a collection and they still do this now. **'We used to dress them up! We used to dress them up. ... put a veil on them, dress them up in the wool, and we used to sew up their coats, ... when they went to put their arms in they were sewn up! The factory buses used to be outside, picking them up, well, of course we all had to run, (well, I didn't) but the girls had to run because they just used to just jump on and the buses used to go. They didn't wait for anybody. Of course they were trying to get their sleeves – their hands into – so they were all dressed up, makeup on, ...'** Dressed in the veil and tying wool the same as before.

The factory buses waited outside – serving Pullman's, Teddington and Corgi. The workers came from the valleys - **Tai'r Gwaith, Brynaman and the Amman Valley generally.** No differences between these girls. They also came from Penygros and perhaps Crosshands. .Mentions Joyce from Tai'r Gwaith who has retired but has come back to help them and Laura who's from Brynaman.

The wage, did go up – when she got married in (1969?) she was earning £12.60 a week. After that **'It crept up a bit – it's not that big now, mind – minimum wage we're having now – some of us.'** She can't remember what she was paid when she worked from home because it varied. But she feels she has to say that the bosses were and are very good if anything went wrong with your family **'you could go home, and ...'** You could have time off for a funeral or something **'if you could make up your hours.'** When her husband died they were marvellous.

46.18

Retirement does. There will be a do at the end of September this year. She hasn't received any gift for working in the factory for over 50 years! **'I might have a pullover perhaps.'** **Girls who retire get a pullover, a cardigan or a throw for a bed.** Mary, one of the girls who was in school with her has just had a throw. The girls from the floor collect – for her sixtieth they gave money towards a present – she chose a ring (which Margaret is wearing) with more money from her family. She had a bunch of flowers from the company. The former workers don't have a club to meet up, but for the do at the end of September, Christopher (Jones) is paying for them to go to have an Indian. Some of the former workers (e.g. Mary the

ex-supervisor) will return for this. The company used to pay for the Christmas party in the old days too and they have one now and the drinks and food are paid for.

Singing on the factory floor - only for enjoyment not to help with the work Today they're not allowed radios (only personal ear phones) because the license would cost £1000 a year. **Indeed before that license fee came in they did have a wireless on. Because of the earphones nobody talks now on the factory floor.** She can't stand it in her ear. When they played records – they all used to pool in and one person every week would have a choice – she liked Cliff Richard(s).

If she had a choice again about working in a factory she would come back 'I've enjoyed myself here.' Her employment has been constant – although the company has been into liquidation once or twice, but they've worked until they found a buyer, and then Corgi has bought it back.

50.25

Royal visits? Princess Anne came and she 'was very nice.' She can't remember when. Because there was a lot of asbestos in the factory they've thrown a lot of stuff (i.e. company archives). She talks about some of the pictures on the wall of the Board Room. Princess Anne came to open the new factory.

Prince Charles , calls when he goes to Myddfai, he wears their socks '**and I darned his socks. ... he's got hunting socks (not from Corgis) but he has sent them here for us to be repaired for him. You'd have a shock!**' (Laughs!)

She does all the repairs for the factory. If companies send something back, she repairs them by hand. (She shows examples from the rack) She doesn't have a machine job now – she repairs by hand. She did work as an instructor on the knitting – on the knitting they had to stand at the machines all day, though she sits for her work now. The socks, were done sitting down but the knitting standing. '**It was hard going.**' The knitwear started in 1960 (having asked Huw Jones for the information). She was taught to do this aspect of the work by Huw himself. The knitwear was still socks – she describes the procedure. There were fine and heavy gauges and she would be making socks in either as required.