

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/ LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI

Pembroke Dock Woollen Factory (1969), & Davies Steel, Pembroke Dock (1969-1971 approx)

Interviewee: VSW067 Miranda (Mandy) Jones (maiden name Miranda Davies)
Date of birth: 3 July 1954
Date of interview: 3 October 2014
Interviewer: Susan Roberts on behalf of Women's Archive Wales

Mandy was born in Haverfordwest. Her father had a multitude of jobs – he had a taxi, a removals business, he had a few shops, a market stall. Mandy's mother was registered as blind. She didn't find looking after the children a problem, despite the fact that she was partially sighted. She had attended Bridgend School for the blind. Mandy was the eldest of seven children. After her mother and father divorced her mother went on to have another son, and her father had two daughters.

Mandy attended Albion Square School, the Coronation Secondary School (Lower and Upper). Mandy enjoyed school and left when she was fifteen years old. She had already started working before she left school and had a job in a cafe in Tenby. The job was working for her friend's auntie at the cafe. She received two pounds and fifty pence for a fortnight's work, so decided to leave.

She then went to work at the woollen factory. She hadn't heard that there were any jobs available there, she just went along and asked. She was interviewed by the manager of the woollen factory who had a house next door. Many girls worked there at the time. Mandy was interviewed on the Friday, and started work on the Monday. No qualifications were required to work at the factory. The interview questions were about punctuality and politeness.

The factory floor where the looms were situated was extremely noisy. This is where Mandy was sent to work initially but she couldn't tolerate the noise, so went to work in the mending

room instead. Nobody wore any protective ear guards. The factory had been around a long time and was well established. Mandy's aunties used to work there when they were young, but had finished by the time that she started there.

Mandy went there on her own to look for work. She felt frightened when she started work because of the size of the room.

00.06.20: 'It was massive, and they had big reels of material down one end, and of course there was .. (SHE MAKES THE NOISE OF THE LOOMS). That's all you could hear. So I was a bit wary of it.'

She estimates that there were well over a hundred people working at the factory at that time – at the looms, in the mending room, the packing, the sorting. The employees were a mixture of men and women.

Her father advised her to get out of the room where the looms were situated. She was moved to the mending room. Training was minimal. She was shown what to do once and was then expected to get on with it. There was a lovely atmosphere at the factory.

00.07.52: 'It was like a family.'

She was earning approximately three pounds a week back then in 1969. She gave her mother housekeeping money out of her wages but could keep the rest. She loved buying shoes, and would also save some money. She would walk to work, from Queen Street down to the factory which would take about a quarter of an hour. She would leave the house at approximately seven o'clock in order to start work at half past seven.

The factory produced woollen fabric. Mandy remembers one of them was identified as D289, and this is the one that she mended the most. Sometimes a bobble would form in the fabric. Mandy would take the bobble out, and fix that area with wool. The fix was supposed to be invisible to the eye. This was Mandy's job. Mandy thinks that if she'd carried on there, it would have been another notch on her belt, as the work required some skill to complete. She was there for approximately six months, but she's not sure. The noise still bothered her and this is one of the main reasons that she left, even though by then she was in the mending room. (The mending room was next door to the looms, and even though the doors would be shut it was still noisy.) She would be able to hear the noise, even after going home, for example when she was in the bath. It was the constancy of the noise that got to her rather than the level of it.

Mandy would have a quarter of an hour's break at eleven o'clock, an hour's break at a quarter to two, and an afternoon break of half an hour at approximately four o'clock. Mandy enjoyed the work in the mending room, but not the work on the looms.

In the loom room she was required to check the bobbins, and ensure that the material was even as it was coming through.

Some of the pieces of material were quite rough, which would give her sore fingers. There was a mixture of younger and older women working there. Mandy was the youngest there when she worked there. Mandy liked to talk, but talking wasn't frowned upon at the factory, unlike at other work places. There was time to joke around during breaks. Once a break was over Mandy was required to go back to her station to work and stay put.

For the mending Mandy would be sat at a long table, approximately fourteen foot long. The material would go over a rail and would be pulled back in order for her to check. There were no perks for working in the woollen factory. The woollen factory was a traditional place to work, where as in the steel factory, things were more 'loose'.

In the woollen factory the men tended to do the lifting, moving the rolls of material, and taking it out to the depot. There wasn't much of a social life for Mandy at the factory, because the women were older than her. There was only one shift – a day shift – at the woollen factory. There were no unions there.

Mandy went on the work at Davies Steel and thinks that her motivation was the higher wages available at Davies Steel.

00.18.25: 'It was like a man's wage, fifteen pounds a week was like a man's wage, and I was just fifteen.'

She was using a substance called Jeysa (?), which was a diesel, in order to wash the blades of the roller skates, after dipping them. The hands weren't protected in any way. Luckily she didn't develop dermatitis.

Davies Steel was a modern type of factory. Mandy's aunties had also worked here. They made roller skates, ice skates and other products. When she started at the factory, she was warned not to go over to one side where there were large tanks, as there was "cyanide in the water", because they knew she would go and ask. She can't remember whether there was a union in this factory. It was hard work at the factory, but it was fun as well. It was more fun than the woollen factory because it wasn't as strait-laced. The bosses were more approachable there. It was a bigger enterprise than the woollen factory, and a younger workforce. Mandy's friend also worked there. They would finish work at half past four on a Thursday, which was pay day, and buy a frozen Mar Bar on the way home. One of her sisters would walk her out at seven o'clock in the morning.

A man tried to get Mandy into his van one morning when she was walking out to the steel factory. Mandy told him that her father had told her not to get into a car with any stranger. She ran the rest of the way to the factory. Another time, she was walking home from town, and a man told her that her dad had sent him to fetch her. She knew this wasn't true. She told her father what had happened and he went looking for him.

The men and the women in the work force at Davies Steel got on well. Mandy's job was cleaning the blades of the skates. She also did the "punching" which was punching the name

Davies Steel into the blades. She also worked in packing where she worked with a girl who was “deaf and dumb”. The work in Davies Steel was more varied and meant she didn’t have to sit down in one place all day.

00.26.02: [In the woollen factory] it was like checking, checking, mending, checking, checking mending. With Davies Steel it was like (MAKES A WHIRRING NOISE)’

They were allowed to buy the skates at cut price.

00.26.31: ‘We all had roller skates. All my brothers and sisters had roller skates.’

Mandy’s parents were very proud that she had a job at Davies Steel. There were no organised social events, as such. Mandy can’t remember any Christmas events that were arranged at the factory. The other type of work available for girls at the time was shop work, such as Woolworths. This type of work didn’t appeal to Mandy.

Working relations between the factory floor and supervisors were good. Mandy can’t remember there being any bad supervisors there. Mandy admired quite a few of the “ladies” who worked there.

00.29.27: ‘Oh my gosh, you wouldn’t think they were going to work. You’d think they were going out. They were so smart, and they hardly ever got dirty. I was black by the time I’d finished. ‘

There was no bad language there. The supervisors were quite strict about behaviour, and about where workers were allowed to go in the factory, because there was a lot of machinery there. Mandy used to wander around during her break but she would be told off for this.

Mandy had to clock in and clock out at both factories. In today’s terms she thinks that the work there was dangerous due to the machinery, but she didn’t think so at the time.

00.32.11: “As long as you’re careful and you do as your supposed to do, there’s no danger then is there”.

There was a nurse working there full time. Her office was situated next door to the manager’s office.

They were overcoat overalls to work, and these were provided by the company.

Mandy wasn’t aware of any disputes or problems that may have arisen during the time that she was there. She thinks the workers were treated fairly. Mandy didn’t like going to the end of the factory where there were chemicals present.

It was cold in the factory in the winter (in fact it was cold all of the time), although Mandy wouldn’t feel the cold once she had started working. It was a five day a week working week (with no weekend work).

There was a canteen in a separate building, which is still standing, unlike the main factory building. The canteen was spotless, and the food was lovely, although Mandy took sandwiches. There would be quite a lot of gossiping during break time, although it was good natured, unlike other places where she worked after that. She says of the atmosphere there,

00.38.20: ‘If you had something to say, you’d say it out.’

Everybody knew each other’s business in the factory.

Unlike at other factories, they didn’t play music to the workers as they worked. Davies Steel wasn’t as noisy as the woollen factory. They would have a sing song in work from time to time in the canteen, and sometimes they would sing outside. There was a cemetery opposite and they would go and sit there. Mandy and her friend were sat there one day eating their sandwiches when a stoat appeared.

The only protective gear issued to Mandy during her time at Davies Steel was the overall. There was a cream they could put on their hands before they started work but this would make the steel more slippery. Mandy never suffered any skin problems, but her uncle who worked there suffered from dermatitis.

Girls smoked in the factory while they were working. This was allowed.

Young boys who started work there would be teased by the older women. It was common for the women to ask the young recruits to go and fetch a ‘sky hook.’ Young girls would also be asked to perform the same task, although Mandy wasn’t caught out by this because she had been forewarned by her father. Some of the young workers would get upset by this.

Mandy couldn’t call the older workers by their first names. They would be called Mr or Mrs something.

00.46.57: ‘That was the rule for younger ones when we were growing up. Everybody was the same.’

Mandy was called to the office one day because she had been calling one of the supervisors ‘horse face.’ The manager was trying not to laugh in front of the complainant but told her she had to promise Mr Powell horse face again. She promised not to call him horse face as long as he promised not to speak to her in the way he had been doing. Mandy felt he had been treating her disrespectfully. He wasn’t even on her section. They didn’t like each other and never got on.

Everything in the canteen was home made.

Mandy can’t remember how many days a year holiday she had but thinks that the factory closed for a week in the summer, and a week at Christmas.

Mandy never felt bored working there. The work lasted for about a year and came to an end because the factory shut. There was no indication prior to its shutting that it was going to close. The workers thought that Davies Steel would never come to an end. All the workers were given a letter informing them that the factory was going to shut down. Mandy was very upset because she would miss the friends who worked with her there.

00.53.40: ‘You had to be tough. You know what I mean, I’m not saying it was easy working there. But as long as you stood your ground ... Stand up for yourself, and not show any weakness. I didn’t anyway...’

Mandy learnt to jive at the toilets in Davies Steel during a break. Her and her friends used to go to a club on Friday nights. Two of the girls had promised her she would be ‘jiving by Friday night’.

The wages were paid on an hourly basis. Mandy thinks that the work in the woollen factory might have been paid on a piece work basis.

After working at Davies Steel Mandy went to work at the Power Station. She didn’t mind what type of work she got. She likes variety and doesn’t like doing the same thing over and over again. If Davies Steel had continued she would have stayed on there. She doesn’t think that working at another factory would have provided her with the same positive experience as Davies Steel had been such a nice ‘unit’. She could have got a job at a factory around the corner but didn’t want to pursue this as she wanted to do something different. Everybody in Davies Steel had been friendly and ready to help one another out.

00.59.33: ‘It was really, really hard work, long hours, but rewarding.’

The day they left is the day that sticks out in her mind. They were all crying.

01.00.01: ‘Really, really sad. We were all coming out at the same time, knowing we weren’t going to clock in the next day. ‘

Working at the factory taught her social as well as practical skills.