

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/LLEISIAU O LAWR Y FFATRI

AB METALS - ABERCYNON

Interviewee: VSE006.2 Sylvia Ann Reardon
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Wales / Archif Menywod Cymru

Right then Sylvia. Could you tell me please your name and date of birth?

My name is Sylvia Ann Reardon and my date of birth is 5th February 1938.

Could you tell us a little about your background – where you were born, your father, your mother and siblings and what they did?

I was born just before the war in 1938 and at that time we lived in an area of Mountain Ash called Darran Las, which is three-quarters way up the mountain. I can remember bits about that. In fact, I was about 18 months old when the war started, and I can actually remember the sirens going off on the Sunday afternoon. We moved from there and I attended the little local Darran Las school, but my mother wasn't very happy with the house we were in, which was actually two rooms behind a shop. We spent all the war, most of the war years there, but we moved down to a nice, bigger terraced house in the Miskin and I had to change schools. And I always say, thank god for the headmaster we had in Miskin Junior mixed, who was progressive, encouraged you to think for yourself, even though you were only seven or eight years old, and set you on the right road to have the attitude towards education, respect for your elders and work. My mother always worked. She, at that time there wasn't much for women to do, except cleaning or shop work, so my mother always cleaned. But during the war she had worked in the munitions and farmed me out to an aunt of mine, with four children, which delighted me because I was an only child. But the evacuees were brought down and my mother was the kindest hearted woman you could meet, and they brought to our front door in Consort

Street, a little boy and his older sister. Other people wouldn't take them because they were half siblings, and they couldn't share a room, so my mother took them in and she gave up her job in the munitions, and she had me back from my aunts. But I gave the little girl the most horrendous life when she was with us, because I was intensely jealous of her, and she coming down from London had such lovely clothes, and I was highly delighted one day, when my mother had been drying her clothes on the line stretched across the coal fire and they all caught fire. That absolutely delighted me. I was a horror. And they had been bombed out twice in London, but their parents came down and collected them at the end of the war, and it was then my mother decided to move again into a small house in the centre of Mountain Ash, which was called a chapel house. It was a chapel house because behind it was this big, Methodist chapel which my mother had decided she would clean, to get the house rent free, and she was given 10 shillings a month for cleaning this chapel, and they had six meetings a week and three on a Sunday. So you kind of knew a bit about slave labour.

03:53

My father was a communist so he didn't really like the way the deacons treated my mother, but he was quite willing to light the huge boiler in the chapel with his pit coal, because you couldn't get coke to start a fire. And I can remember as a child my mother also cleaning offices on a Sunday, and saying to me, you make sure that that boiler doesn't go out. You go up there at 11 o'clock after the service, or 12 o'clock, and you poke the clinkers out in the boiler. Now for anyone to be told that at the age of 12 I suppose, when the poker itself was six foot long and you'd be up there ramming these clinkers with the poker. I can tell you, you knew that your mother worked hard. My father was a seven day a week man on what was called the screens in the deep Duffryn. That was where the coal came up in trams, was unloaded onto a turntable and came down on almost like a long, long filter where they sorted out the coal that was no good, and the others fell through the various sized holes and was graded. Now that's the background of me, of my childhood.

05:22

I wasn't, I failed the scholarship miserably. Didn't know what the scholarship was all about and I came 149th out of 159 people trying the scholarship. So at that time, there was three different types of school. There was the grammar school which was pukka in Mountain Ash, and it was an old manor house belonging to Lord Aberdare. By god, you were something if you got to the grammar school. And there was a flat-roofed school which was called Central School and from there you could try, your GCEs or your Oxford certificates it was at that time, your GCEs. There was a third school which really catered for people who were intended to go into shop work, factory work or something else. We never viewed it like that, we were children, we never viewed it like that, but

when I was 15 that school was reorganised and we went down, we, by we I mean, the prospective college students, went down to Abertaf selective secondary school in Abercynon, where we could try our school certificates and from there leapfrog our way into teaching college or whatever it was. So I was transferred down there at 15 with practically my whole class. The following year we tried our school certificates. By this time now, I had got into my educational stride so I knew where I was, and stayed on there until I was 17 and applying to colleges. Didn't get in to Bath Academy of Art which I wanted. Didn't want to wait another year, said to my father, I think I'll go to a commercial college in Cardiff, Clarks commercial college. To which he replied, and how do you intend to pay for that? And I said, oh, I thought you would anyway. So he paid for me to go there for a year. During that year I had a big operation on my right eye, which had been damaged during the war when somebody had thrown a stone at it, and when I came out I had a job in the electricity board in Aberdare. It never entered my head to go back to college. And I know now that it was a bitter disappointment to my parents that I didn't turn out to be a teacher. But, once you had the bite of the apple and you had an income, you didn't want to give that up. I was working when I was watching friends still struggling in their last year, you know. So I worked for the electricity board, loved it. Went from there to the Youth Employment Service, hated it because the Youth Employment Officer didn't like me, and he even used to audit the tea book. Left there then to go to a little factory in Trefforest called Copygraph in the credit control section, didn't like it....

08:30

Can I stop you a minute? How old were you when you went to Copygraph?

About 19 and a half. I didn't leave school until I was nearly 19.

Since you went to that factory first, I know you said you didn't like it.

Didn't like it. I did three days one week and hid at my friend's and pretended I was going to work. And I did three days the other week and hid at my friend's and pretended that I was going to work so that my mother wouldn't know I wasn't going to work. And then I gave my notice in, not with my mother knowing. Because you could pick up jobs easy then, you had a choice of jobs, you know, you didn't have to go here, you could have four you could apply for and probably get three. And the way I got caught out was that I'd left a pair of shoes in the office and one of the girls brought the shoes to the house, and when I got up the following morning my mother had written on the bathroom wall, in lipstick, oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive. So I never deceived since, you know. It's just so easy to get caught out. And it was from there that I thought oh well, the biggest employer around here is AB Metal Products. I'll

give them a go. I'm not going on the line, I'm not going to go on the line, and my mother said, you're not going on the line with your education, you're not going on. So I went down and a friend of mine said they're looking for people on the invoicing section, busy section, so I'd done a couple of invoices when I was in the electricity board, went down, had my interview, started work, and worked like a dog. ABs expected you to really earn your crust. But there was such a rapport in the office and you really felt that you were a very important cog in that wheel, and if you didn't work to your best ability, you know, all would fall around you. That was what you were encouraged to think. So I went to ABs, and I was there, I had my 21st birthday in AB Metals, so that would be 1959, and was there then until 196..., tail end of 1966.

10:57

Can I just ask you how old were you went to AB Metals?

20. You were never out of work long. I mean if you were out of work, you weren't out of work long enough to sign on for unemployment benefit, because you'd be out, all the jobs, The Echo, would be crammed with jobs and you'd circle what you wanted...

So, can I just ask then, why did you decide to work there, because you were....

Because it was commutable. You see, nobody had cars then. Nobody drove then. So to get to Treforest I had to practically catch two buses and hang around in the rain and that had put me off, but to get to ABs you had an AB's bus, well you had 20 AB's buses and, they'd pick you up in Mountain Ash, drop you at what they called the top of the trip to go down, but coming home in the night you'd be picked up outside the factory, and dropped anywhere in your own locality that you wanted to be dropped in. So at that time we worked till half past five, so when we finished work, there were no shops open, there were no 24 hour Asda's, there was nothing you know. You did one shop a week and it lasted.

So, I was going to ask, did the company pay for your transport then?

No. I think you paid yourself. It was only a pittance thought you know, it wasn't much at all. The red and white buses they were on contract to the factory, but you did the paying. The factory pay for it? You must be joking.

12:33

Right, so you went to ABs. Were there people from, you know, friends you knew, other people working there?

No. I didn't know anyone there at all. I went into the section which had, one, two, three – about nine girls working in it. There was what we would now call a team leader in charge of that, but you weren't given titles there because the minute, they felt, the management, that if they gave you any acknowledgement of authority, you'd want extra money, so you weren't, you were the team leader but you wasn't overpaid for doing it. I didn't know anybody there but I was very, there's a camaraderie in these offices and factories that you don't see a lot of now. It's more rivalries now. But you did pull together and it was, I've still got friends that I met on that first day I was there, and I mean, there's been a lot of those dear people that I worked with then, who have passed on and you feel great regret about it. And there was a bit of a sub-culture you see, because, there were men in charge really, you'd have your little desk and you'd be doing your job but it was the man who came in with the initial documentation who was in charge. And they were all treated with the greatest of respect. There was no answering back. You might stand your corner and argue your case, but you didn't because there was such a protocol regarding the work, that if you followed what you had to do, it's like the civil service with documentation. There's not a lot can go wrong you know. I do remember at one time when I was typing export documents for a shipment that was going to Port Elizabeth in South Africa, and every case that went out, a case of potentiometers, like a tea chest style case, would have to have an identification mark on the side, and that might be a big triangle with AB in the middle for AB Metals, and underneath were 1 to 26 or 3 to 26 to show that this was the third box of 26 similar boxes, and I had made a mistake and typed – it should have been picked up after me – and typed the wrong, didn't put Port Elizabeth, put something else. And the whole shipment went to Australia instead of South Africa. Gosh, there was uproar. And they had me in the office, and the boss was on and chirping and chirping about it, and I said, look, short of hanging myself I don't know what I can do about it, but the only thing I can suggest is that you get hold of Customs, send some correspondence, explain what was wrong and get it re-shipped to the correct address. And he looked at me in amazement, because that was sort of standing up to him, but it wasn't cheekily, yes. I'll never forget that shipment going to Australia. Thousands and thousands of pounds worth of tuners they were, for television.

16:00

What's that sorry?

Thousands of tuners for televisions. I mean we now can't imagine the size of stuff that went into these pieces of equipment. Because you can do everything on your phone that took something the size of a radiator to operate before, you know, the whole world of technology has moved on such much hasn't it, that's the part about it. That was one aspect of my job. But when I first went onto that section, it was very menial little tasks of typing these invoices, and you might have to type a hundred invoices a day. Attached to the invoice was advice notes, and it was these advice notes that went out to despatch which told them what customer to send what product to. And they were linked, our invoices were linked to what was called a works order, which was filed in numerical order, and that was initially raised because the customer had asked for ABs to supply for example, a thousand potentiometers. And every time you sent a shipment, did an invoice, you would write on the back and take it away from the thousand – 250 potentiometers leave an outstanding balance of 750. And when you come down to the bottom of that, that was marked completed and it went into a different filing system. That was why we had juniors. This was 15-year old girls leaving school, and you didn't have time to do all this, get the order out, link it up with the paperwork, type it, you couldn't do that, you would have to have a junior to do all that for you, because that was not productive as far as the factory was concerned.

Can you explain what a potentiometer is?

A potentiometer was a piece of electronic equipment which went behind a switch which allowed you to change the channel on a radio or on a television. You know, it's, I'd recognise one if I saw one, but I certainly couldn't tell you what its whole functions were. And it wouldn't be just for televisions. ABs was also supplying GHQ. These pieces of equipment would be going into very secret pieces of equipment that were being developed in the research labs, and sonic equipment for submarines and things like that because there were girls in the offices in ABs who were dealing with these various ministry departments who would have to sign the Official Secrets Act. I wasn't one of them but my friend Anita was one of them, and she couldn't discuss what she was doing or who it was being supplied to, but after a while when it, we had to raise an invoice for a department, of course we knew where they'd gone, [unclear 19:14] Park and all these places you see, and I can still remember, we'd be sending samples to these because you'd have to know if they were suitable and there was a little saying you had to type on the sample invoices, and after 60 years I can remember that, 50 years. In the event of these samples being unsuitable, or of you returning same, would you please mark for the attention of Mr Dennis Horseman (?). I can still recite that off by heart. And there's various other little bits I can.

19:56

You must have seen thousands of them?

Thousands and thousands of them. And after we had done our day's quota of the invoices, and there was a lot of paperwork, but you got to trace the paperwork through from the line. The line made the product, the inspector on the line issued something called a movement slip, the movement slip went to the progress chasers' offices, they issued to us duplicate, out of, like a rip out little book, works order number 694 for the sake of a figure, as 37 and the part number of the potentiometer, and it was signed. If it was stamped today's [unclear 20:43], you put all the today ????? in together and you would type them like mad because they had to go out by parcel post or BRS or whatever way they were being transported that particular night. You might be able to put quite ordinary ones by the side and you certainly wouldn't rush to do the repairs, now the repairs came through on a different type of works order. That was handwritten by the repair section, and one of the women there, we really needed magnifying glasses to read her work, because she wrote in the most microscopic handwriting. We couldn't believe it. That was the basis of it there. But for Anita, who had signed the Official Secrets Act, and worked with one particular boss, like a secretary, there was only about six of them there, they were very, very, specialised girls. She would issue to us what they called a release note. They were released by the Ministry to ask us to type this stuff, and you would have to put the release note number on there and that kind of thing. And, they were never involved in exports. This sort of thing only went on in this country. Research and developments for different government departments. But all over the world you had firms like Negretti and Zambra, Coster ???, Murphy radio, Ferguson, EK Cole, all of those were being supplied by AB Metals. It had a vast customer base.

20:21

Can I just ask you then, can you list a few things, you know, apart from the things you've mentioned already, the kinds of things you made at AB Metals?

Well I didn't go out on the factory floor. I didn't actually see any of these products you see.

No, but you knew?

Yes, they made... Smart & Brown made what they called – about four years into my stint in ABs, they took over a firm in London called Smart & Brown and they brought all their paperwork down and all their products, they bought them. Brought them down to

Ynysboeth. Now Smart & Brown made connectors. Now if you ask me what a connector was, or what it did I couldn't tell you. I could probably tell you the prices and that they were exported, but I couldn't tell you what the product looked like.

Was it all for kind of televisions, radios all those...?

Yes. Really speaking, when the bottom began to fall out of this type of market because the products were changing their format, and developing, ABs moved with the times to a certain extent but they didn't deviate from what they were doing. They'd adapt with the times. Well, at that stage then, other factories were setting up and eventually ABs got smaller and smaller. When I was working there, there were 4000 women working on the lines. Now I mean, they, it's unbelievable when you think like that in all those factories, I think they had four factories, there were four thousand women. Now where would the economy of this valley have been if those four thousand women were suddenly wiped out of the equation. And I weathered a few redundancies down there and I can remember getting - we'd have an idea in the office, Anita Cummings and myself because we would deal with a lot of confidential work - we'd have an idea in the office because we'd get the redundancy lists - now this was nothing to do with the factory floor, this was people they knew were going to go. And one of those lists came to me and my friend's husband was on it, and he was on what they called the hand presses, where you had what now looks like a piece of weight-lifting equipment. You stretched your hand up above your head, you swung this huge lever across in front of your face, it brought down a punch on top of a dye, and the dye imprinted on the metal and here was your little casing almost like the base of one of those little tiny candles you get, and that [unclear 25:14] would be the case to put the potentiometer into, that would be the outer case. Then you'd put something else and build it up if you were working on the lines. And he was going to be made redundant and I thought, oh my god, they've just bought a house, what's going to happen and all that. So I went home and I mentioned to my father that this gentleman was going to be made redundant, Henry Jones, and he had initially been a blacksmith, and my father was working in the colliery as a banksman, and he said, oh that's funny now, because they're looking for a blacksmith striker in the Duffryn. So I said, how am I going to tell Henry to look for that job, when he doesn't even know he's going to be redundant and that job is going in the next two days? And I thought well, you've got to bite the bullet. You've got to break confidentiality, where do your loyalties lie. So I did tell him, he did come up to the pit, he didn't say anything to ABs, he waited for his redundancy, and he got the job as a blacksmith's striker. And he never forgot that because my father had to retire, a little bit early, he had Parkinson's Disease. And at that time in the pit you had an allocation of stick, because we all had coal fires, a block it was called, it was probably cut off a pit prop. And he would every week, Henry would chop that up, bind it in a piece of wire, it would be oh, the size of a - dimensions,

circumference of a bucket perhaps. Huge block. And every week on a Friday, I'd open the front door to go to work and this block would be on the doorstep, never forgot that my father had remembered him when he needed a job. Which sort of sums up the way of life all through the valley you know, and that kind of kindness and caring, you found in abundance in the factories. You were very loyal to the people on your lines, and the people in your office and you had a marvellous social life out of it. Great.

27:33

Before we go on to that, I just need to ask you a few practical questions here now. When you went for the job, did you need formal qualifications for that job?

No. It wasn't like the civil service or the local government where you had to have a minimum of three GCSEs. Of course I was qualified. I had my GCSEs, my A levels and my commercial qualifications, so I could walk into jobs really.

Did you have an interview there?

Siprick Yes, yes. Can't remember much about it though. One minute I was sort of outside, and the next minute I was sitting behind the typewriter. That's how quick they'd take you on you know. And at that time there was no big personnel department there. That developed as legislation altered and the factory started to expand a bit you know.

What about your first day at work? Can you remember you know the impression of the whole thing, of the work space and

Oh yes, I can tell you a story about this now. We were there before the health and safety legislation came in, so they'd cram you into offices. You'd be desk facing desk, and then you'd be back of chair to back of chair, you'd hardly have enough room to get in. You didn't have enough time, you certainly didn't get up and go to the toilet three or four times a day. You had your allocated tea break – ten minutes. But you could smoke, smoke till the place looked as if it was on fire. It was terrible when you think about it now. Not a window open, thumping with heat and you'd all be dragging on these Woodbine cigarettes and I was the worst of them all. Anyway, that set the scene there. That was it. Well at one time there must have been at least 20 desks, and the man, Mr Roderick who was in charge of all this potentiometer section, overall watching us, nice enough chap. His desk was facing ours, but there was a woman working there called Peggy Siprick (?) and I modelled myself on her work standards all my life. She would

not be intimidated. She would not be pushed beyond her limits and she conducted herself beautifully. It would be produced, it would be given, and she took no guff off anyone. It was brilliant. But I was terribly talkative, and I can see now that the poor girl who was in charge of the section must have been driven mad because I'd be telling the girl opposite all about the pictures I saw last night and all that, and they wanted the work out faster you know, and I thought, what's the bloody urgency, it won't go until half past four. That kind of thing.

30:18

Did you enjoy the work though?

Oh I did. And everyone will tell you who worked in ABs, that they'd go back tomorrow if it was still there, that it was the best time of their life, and it was the best training ground for anywhere. You'd work anywhere if you'd worked in ABs. With confidence and capability. You wouldn't just say, oh we had to work hard there, so I know I can work anywhere because it won't be as hard as this. That wasn't the attitude. I took from ABs an awful lot of stuff I've adapted to other jobs... and found extremely helpful and extremely useful. It was a wonderful, wonderful place to work. And the systems they had set up were so efficient, you couldn't fault them in the office. And I know the lines operated the same. I had a break and I went back to ABs after about two or three years and they had reorganised the lines on the factory floor. The lines used to be one straight line, you'd start off at the top end, perhaps there'd be 30 girls on this line and you'd have the casing. It would go down and somebody else would put, for the sake of words now, a washer and a nut, that would pass onto the next one. Now, that was their job all day putting these few things in. But when I went back after a few years this had been adapted and it was now like a carousel, in a circle. And with only one operator on it, and she had various trays in front of her, so she'd put it on this one and by the time it came round she was ready to put the second part on. So they now only had one girl instead of 30. That's how things began to alter.

What about your job, did your job change at all when you were there?

It changed because things got busier, we started doing the invoicing for Smart & Brown as well. But it changed really because the young woman who was in charge of us, called Connie Dixon, a pretty, pretty girl and a lovely girl, died of cancer when she was 26. And you didn't have computers then, you had comptometers. Have you ever seen a comptometer?

32:46

No.

No. Well, it's a flat piece of equipment covered in buttons, all buttons. Almost like a mechanical abacus. And you were trained as a comptometer operator, and you used both hands in a raised wrist position, pushing these buttons in sequence depending on whether you wanted calculations for money or troy ounces for weight, for scrap or something like that. And that girl would be writing then on your slip ready for you to invoice the value of these 37 potentiometers at six and sixpence each. So you had that ready for your invoice. Well we had a girl working with us, brilliant comptometer operator, and she had been there when I started work on the section. And I think she thought she'd had the promotion, but she didn't. I had it. And they had to take on more girls, but I had that promotion and a seven and sixpence a week increase in my wages. Now you are responsible for handling a million pounds of worth of invoices a month, and you had to balance the books for the accounts department. They liked your invoices to be less than their money was coming in. So that it looked as if, oh, we're in the black. And Anita, my friend, and I, never went on annual holidays the same time as anyone else, because we had to get all the paperwork finished and up to date so where the factory would close on a Friday, I couldn't go on holidays or book a flight until the Monday.

34:33

Right, I'm going to ask you then, can you remember how much you were paid a week and a month?

When I reached 21 which in industry was when you reached your mature wage, I was on four pound, nine and sixpence, and I told the girl on the section I was working, ooh look, I've got my full pay now, four pounds, nine and sixpence. She'd been there a few years and she said, well I only got four pounds, eight and sixpence. I don't think it's fair you should have a shilling more than me. Five p in our money now. And she went and queried with our head of department and they took my extra shilling off me. They didn't give her an extra shilling, they just took mine. There was odd ways they did things. When the health and safety came in, it was very basic, the rules. You were allowed so much square footage to work in and at that time we'd been moved into a partitioned office inside the despatch department. And we were overcrowded and I had read the health and safety Act and worked out we were entitled, I think it was to 45 square feet, per person, and we didn't have anywhere near that. So I went to the head of department and said, look, we're entitled to 45 square feet. Now that included head room because

there was a ceiling, and when we went in the next day, we had 45 square feet because they'd taken the ceiling off the office. So they had ways of coming round it like. Yes. Because with no ceiling, the noise in there was insufferable but you just got on with it, just got on with it. And then I asked for an overhead lamp because it was very dark where I was working in the corner, a little desk lamp, and they gave me one that you dare not touch because you'd take the skin off the palm of your hand, because it got so hot. But there you are. Loved it. Wouldn't change it for the world.

To go back to the wages, what was the parity then, you know?

We weren't held in comparison with the factory. They had their own rates of pay because they had their own union. They were with the General Workers, electronic union, something like that. But the staff had no union at all. The shop floor's wages were worked out nationally, so they had national representation, and they had cost of living rises every year. In the office it was like a concession whether that cost of living rise ever filtered through to the office staff. Now we had no trade union, and I felt very strongly that we needed it, and at the time, the what was called the Clerical and Administrative Workers' Union was pushing for recruitment. Now how I got hold of this I don't know but we had a fellow called Phil Saunders come up. Couldn't come to the factory, we had to meet secretly in a public house called The Junction in Abercynon. Be very selective who you asked to go because a lot would take this information back to the management. We joined the union there and we had to recruit people in the offices to join us and we had to secretly collect the money every month, the donations, so we had a collector in each office. But of course we had to make representation to the management when we felt we got strong enough to hold our own, and my friend at the time, Anita Cummings, myself and Anne from ??? we were pulled up before the very head, Mr Crock, and nearly lost our jobs, but argued our case that it would be beneficial to the directors and the factory owners if we had the same representation as the shop floor, and they hadn't had any strikes going on and we didn't anticipate any either, but there could be an improvement in conditions on both sides. So that's what we did. And I think the Clerical and Administrative Workers' eventually evolved into Unison. So that was how we started.

39:21

Oh right. What about, just another, what about parity with the men workers? Do you know

No, there was no parity. Salary parity. You must be joking. You didn't know who earned what for a start, but you knew the men were on at least 75% more than you. And the old argument was always they've got families to keep, and it was as if the whole of the male population classed a working woman, whatever her personal circumstances, as working for, in inverted commas, pin money. Where a lot of these women, particularly single women like myself, were working to support yourselves. You had practically the same outgoings and I can remember when I was made head of the section, and I had my seven and sixpence extra, that I actually didn't have anything extra in my pay packet because I was single and paid the full insurance stamp, and the other women working there were married and paid a reduced, and I had less money. And I went to the very, very head of my department and put this case to him and he said, well unfortunately, I'm not responsible for your marital status. So that was how it worked. There was no comparison.

Was this something you brought up with the union?

Yes, yes it was. But the wheels would grind very slowly. Very slowly. And you always felt that union or no union, there was that little threat that in the next redundancy, you might be on the list.

41:07

When did the redundancies start in ABs?

They came quite frequently and you'd have them every now and then. The order book would look empty, future order book. Redundancies don't depend on how much work they've got at the time, it depends on how much is on the order book, and if the order book for the next six months looks bad, they're not going to keep you on until it picks up, because then you had your choice of workers. It was like the old collieries years ago when they were privately owned. They would rather lose a miner in an accident, than a horse because you had to pay for a horse. You didn't have to pay to replace a miner. There's always somebody waiting to go in. And it was a bit like that in ABs. You know there was always a queue of women ready to go in there.

Did you become an official with the union?

Yes, there were shop stewards on the floor but we were reps, we were just repping. And my father had been a secretary of the miner's union in the colliery, the deep Duffryn

colliery here, and I can remember him saying to me, you don't want to take that, you don't want to take that position. Because you'll find that whenever you're going to defend anyone, they're generally in the wrong anyway, and your problem will be that you will see both sides and you will want to say, well, your time keeping is appalling, your sickness record is awful. He said, you can't, you're representing those people. So I found it quite difficult really. Because I was, technically in my mind, a management person like, I supported management.

42:50

Did it go against you with the company though? Do you think?

No, no. I don't think they cared much. They knew we had no teeth. We were a dog without teeth. But we had started it, and it was, I left not long after, and it was up to other people to run with the ball then you know. But, anyone who had a bit of a position in the office wasn't going to join, because they were going to penalise what they already had, so what you had there was more juniors like, and they wouldn't have had the backbone to stick up for the union. They'd have just let it go. We've seen what have happened to unions now. You know half the workforce will be in it, half won't, they can't see the point of it. It's been dead and buried hasn't it, since the pits closed really.

What did you spend your wage packet on?

Well I never seemed to have any savings. Other girls would have savings. And we had a little security guard there, they had the security hut out and you had shifts and we had this little security guard called Freddie Griffiths, he had been a school teacher, quite an elderly man. And every Monday morning, Freddie Griffiths would come round the whole of the staff with a little tin and national savings stamps, and you paid half a crown for a stamp and you had a little book and you filled the book up and you'd have a pound to a page, eight half crowns, and five pounds, a book would be worth five pounds. I never got the five pounds. I'd always be cashing mine before then. And my friend Barbara would throw her full books in the drawer ready for her holidays, and I used to look at her in amazement – how the hell can you do that? And she said to me once, oh I do throw my pay packets in there sometimes and I don't use them. I'd be walking from the bus stop in Mountain Ash up to Chancery Lane, that's the length of the main street, and of course there's plenty of shops there, shoe shops and dress shops. And by the time

I got home I didn't have any money. And that was me Friday. I was terrible. Yes. And you'd have these fantastic nights out. And when you say to people now, oh, the drink was, 17 pence for a drink which would cost you now about £2.50 I suppose, ooh that's was great wasn't it. Yes, but you'd be going out with £1.50, thirty bob like. And perhaps you'd have a meal and all out of that. It was glorious. And I always had the best of clothes because where the others would take their bit of money and go to Cardiff or Ponty and buy something, I'd go into the local dress shop and I'd be paying £2.00 a week off a card, so that I looked well dressed. No, I was useless. Absolutely useless.

Did you used to give any to your Mum?

No. I thought we were rich. I was 27 before I discovered we weren't rich, and my mother was keeping me. It was ridiculous. She was cleaning a bank and a chapel, my father was working overtime and I was spending my money and walking up the mount. No, I didn't have a clue. I thought we were rolling in it. No, it was a big shock to me to find out we weren't.

46:18

Can you tell me then about, you told me about your big productivity drive and what was behind it?

Oh yes. My mother and I were always big ladies, right. My mother and I, well you've got to go back a bit further than my mother and I. My mother and the giant boiler in the chapel. Behind us was a doctor's surgery. And he'd trusted my mother to burn the drug samples in the boiler. And also his medical books. So my mother now was one of the best informed amateur doctors in the valley. She kept all the books, and she would go through all the boxes of drug samples, until she came across something that ended in d r I n. Drin. Dexadrine, amphetamine, anything like that. Not knowing then what we know now that they were dangerous drugs. And we knew about the dexadrines, because in the war, my uncle used to send us tins of rations that the soldiers had in Burma, and when you opened them there was a little packet in there with little yellow tablets called dexadrine. Well of course these poor soldiers were taking these to hype them up and keep them going. When my mother discovered that, she ended up with four cleaning jobs, because of course she had this abundance of energy. Also, she wasn't eating so she eventually weighed 10 stone instead of her normal 12 stone seven. So when, those tins stopped coming but the doctor's samples took over and we had all these 'drins', we got onto them. When that stopped because that particular doctor died, we at that time, they prescribed a lot of slimming tablets on prescription. Some of these were called durophet

and they were amphetamines, and in the invoicing section at the end of the month, you had to work like slaves. You had to turn the work out, you had to hit the financial target, you had to, oh dear, dear, it was dreadful. So there was five girls there and I'd give each one of them a dexadrine or an amphetamine. Good god, there was sparks coming out of the typewriters, the invoices were being, they couldn't keep up with us in despatch. We were like maniacs. And we'd do that for about two or three days and then it would go out of their systems and they'd be like wet rags, but of course it was always in my system because I took it. Well, we got to the stage now when they were going to withdraw these off the market and people on the line, everybody was on them. They had very high targets to reach on the line but they made them and they exceeded them and their bonuses were terrific. When they finally stopped prescribing these tablets, we were all like wet rags. I'm surprised ABs didn't go bankrupt, because we'd all be staring at each other and withdrawal symptoms and nasty with each other and everything like that, so I knew that my friend Anne that was working with us, I had given her some tablets called [unclear 49:40], little yellow ones, and she was having her house altered. And I said, can I fetch some of those ??? in look, we're all half dead here. I'll go home dinnertime she said. But they fell down between the floorboards and they've nailed the floorboards back in the bedroom. I said, oh, get the boards up. So she went home and she lifted the floorboards in her bedroom and came back with this packet of dust-covered yellow tablets and we all took them and hit our target for the end of the month. But they were, god how we survived I don't know, but we all looked so nice. We had lovely clothes and our figures were lovely, and our houses. You could do a full day's work, go home, strip the wallpaper off, repaper and do the washing and ironing and turn up for work the next day. But we didn't abuse them, we only ever took one. It was these people who were taking six and seven that gave them a bad name. At least that was our theory. No wonder we thought ABs was wonderful.

50:54

What was, just tell me about the factory a little bit again. What were the facilities like?

Appalling. There was four factories all built in the same style, you know what factories look like. Huge, huge airplane hangars. Noisy. Glass roofs that had to be painted in the summer because the temperature would be up to 90 odd and you'd be nearly dying then, and parts of the factory floor would be taken up with partitioned offices, which were extremely noisy, and to overcome this health and safety thing about not sufficient space nearly all of them had their ceilings removed. You had, for the staff, you had one toilet in the office block that was built out the front, and for the girls on the shop floor, I think there was one block of toilets per factory floor. In the winter you froze and in the summer you roasted until I found out where you could switch the gas heating fans on,

and I'd be down there sneaking behind god knows what, to press the switch, so that we had a bit of warmth for once for the factory. So no, the conditions weren't good. But you had a trolley that came round twice a day, not one trolley, you had about six, and with refreshments on it for the girls on the line, and we'd be sending one from the office out to buy what we wanted from pasties to pies to whatever. You had two nice canteens, segregated – one for the factory workers, one for the staff. And you also had a third one for the directors, but we didn't eat with the factory girls in their canteen, we had our own little canteen which was a bit of better service on it like. The canteens, the food was lovely and the staff canteen had a marvellous cook, we really, really enjoyed that. But you only had half an hour break and in that half an hour most of us would try to walk around the factory, because when you went in you sat at your desk. You didn't get up much which now I suppose would be the equivalent of a long haul flight, so you're all at risk of bloody thrombosis looking back. And you only had one nurse there, who tended to minor cuts and whatever that went into her. So, a couple of first aiders I suppose but that was all the medical care you had there.

Were there any accidents and stuff like that?

Well there would be on some of the machines because you could get hands caught in presses and acid splashes in the plating shop and things like that like. But um, they take them up to the hospital I suppose wouldn't they?

Okay. Two more things. Just the holidays and the social life, okay?

The holidays, you had the factory fortnight if you remember and the miner's fortnight and it was always the same. You had to take those two weeks off, there was no staggered holidays. The factory closed. But before the factory would close, you'd have a full stock take of everything. That took staying on in the nights for people in my position now, not everybody, and then getting the lists through from the stores, stores in every factory because they all made different things, and typing up huge stock sheets. I never went on holidays at the same time because I had to get all the work out and the invoices and this kind of thing. I'd always go on the Monday and come back on a different day. I'd have an extra day tagged on at the end. You had breaks for Christmas but you didn't have five weeks holiday, or six weeks holiday, like people are accustomed to having now. That didn't exist and part-time workers didn't have the same rights as full-time workers, because they did have the occasional part-time worker, and on the shop floor they did have what they called a twilight shift, which most married women with children went on, and that was from 6 till 10 at night. But there was no long holidays and the sickness scheme was quite good. And I was particularly ill at one time and I can remember going

on full pay for a month. It would be a month. Half pay for a month and then nothing. And you'd claim your sickness benefit off the government, but that would be deducted out of your wages anyway, so you only had your wages really.

Where did you go on holiday?

I used to go to Ireland every year. I'd, Easter time, I'd go, grab a couple of days. Whitsun, and my fortnight's holiday was always in Ireland because I had family there and friends. So I'd occasionally go up to Rhyl and my cousins up there, but I always went there. But it was the introduction of the cheap holidays abroad and a lot of the people then were catching, out to Benidorm, out to Spain and you know, it was the claim to fame then that you went abroad. But I never had that urge at all. Partly because I don't like the sun and the sun doesn't like me. So that's where I'd go – Ireland. With my holiday pay, because I wasn't the one who saved for the holidays.

What about social activities then? You said you had a

Oh there was a big social scene there because, remember now, there was a lot of women there whose husbands wouldn't have appreciated them going out for hen nights if they had existed at all. What they wanted was – men didn't mind you going out in a busload of women over to Llanwonno for chicken and chips, that was alright. But we got a bit wiser then and we used to organise something to the Queen of Hearts in Nelson where there was a show going on and then jig about and still saying we were only going over Llanwonno, and the Helmaen club in Usk and the Ocean Club in Cardiff. But you never showed them the photos what you went when you were all dressed up and that kind of thing. But a marvellous social life, marvellous. And I can remember organising a dinner, up in a local hotel here called Aubreys. And he did meals, cooked dinner now for, I think there was 150, 200 of us in buses went up to Aubreys. Had this meal, and at the time it was 'the fastest milkman in the west', was the song. I forget the name now of the fella who used to sing it. And we dressed up as him and there was a backing group and they came in, and I was dressed in this mac with a tan pulled down as the milkman and all this. It was hilarious. We had a hilarious night. And when you consider that this was a small local pub and they could produce all at the same time, 150 cooked dinners, it was amazing.

59:51

So you were talking about the social activities, so you had one story you wanted to say?

Yes. The night we did have this big dinner for 150 women and we decided to do this act to Benny Hill's Fastest Milkman in the West, there was one line in it that said, when he was supposed to be taking a bath in the milk, 'and it came up to my chest', and I was there in an old mac and a tan and I had this policeman's truncheon wrapped in red silver shiny paper and I had it under my mac, and as we came to that line and it came up to my chest I let it emerge slowly between my bust up to my chin, and the whole place erupted. We were absolutely screaming. They thought it was fabulous. Everybody enjoyed it.

So, the camaraderie in the factory, and do you still see these friends now?

Yes. I'm still friendly with at least half a dozen people who I worked with. A lot of people of course in the interim have passed on or moved away. And I mean by friends, in constant touch. One of my friends has moved down to Aberdulais way, and we phone each other every other day, every other day. And you see people in town and you talk to them as if you were all still working together, and you feel when you've heard of a tragedy in their lives, you feel like you did in ABs, you sympathy, empathy, you want to help, and one of the young ladies who was working with us, and was expecting a baby and she wasn't married, and we had a weekly collection until we could buy a cot and a pram and everything else because there was no help then, you know, and there was a stigma attached to anything, but we made sure that that didn't happen to her. She was taken under our wing. And there were times there when we were low paid and needed something very much, and we had a lovely lady, a lot older than us, and she was like our mentor on the section. And you'd only have to say, oh Megan, can you get me a pair of Scholls on your [unclear 1;01:36] book or can you get me a pair of bootees on your ??? book and she'd do it, and we'd pay her back half a crown a week. That was the sort of situation that we were in. Where now, I don't think that would ever arise anywhere. And we had a lady working in our office and she owned an off licence in Nelson, and every week we'd give her our half a crown, half a crown was the standard currency, about all we could afford, and then Christmas time we'd have cherry brandy and egg flip and all these kind of exotic things to take home and have a festive Christmas. So yes, you pulled together and there was no snobbery because nobody had anything to be snobby about. We were on the same wages and in the same circumstances.

62:30

Did you mix with the women on the floor as well?

No, I didn't, I didn't. Because I had my little circle of friends there, and, of course there were people in the office who had sisters and brothers and mothers working in the factory

and it was very much a family place. You know, you'd have three or four sisters working there, and mothers, and because of where it was located in Ynysboeth, with a lot of housing and housing estates around it, there was a tremendous amount of walk to work people were employed there. Where we went down on the factory buses and came home on the factory buses. That disappeared after a while, when they, well people could go further afield because more work came. When ABs started, ABs was the only thing around here and to think that there had at one time been four thousand people working there, you know, suddenly now I expect there's not two hundred.

What did that mean do you think to women of your generation?

It freed them. It freed them up. It meant that they had their own money, that they had the support of their peers, that they weren't tied to the house and thought of as domestics. It freed them from domestic employment outside of the home. There'd always been a category where, if you weren't nursing or teaching, you were in a shop or you were doing cleaning. Well, that disappeared. You were suddenly in a factory. You had your own social scene and you had your own income. Mind there was a lot of marriages that didn't stand it either, but perhaps they wouldn't have anyway. You don't know do you.

On the whole, do you think they were good employers?

Yes I do, I do. You see, you thought of yourself as part of ABs and in the beginning when I was there ABs still had visits from the men who owned it. The Marks brothers would come down from London. Two very handsome men and they'd walk amongst the lines and chat, almost like royalty and you had directors then, Mr Crock and Ray ??? and Brown who lived here, they'd come on the factory floor. They'd walk around but, they had little air about of authority and power and that, but yes it was a lovely place to work, and there was a really competition for Miss ABs, and ABs would put on the most fabulous Christmas do's in the City Hall in Cardiff or Sophia Gardens or wherever. It was a dress up and elbow gloves and silver shoes and they'd pay for the meal and all the tables would be laid out with white linen, and you'd have spaced out along the tables, those gorgeous Sobranie cigarettes that looked like rainbows in boxes and we'd all be dressed in our finery. It was lovely. And I can remember two girls waiting with me for the bus to take us to City Hall, two sisters, and they both had tiaras on which I thought was hysterical. But they were lovely, lovely occasions. They made you feel important and a bit above the valleys setting like. You might be back in the workmen's next week but this week you were in City Hall for Christmas.

Sounds very glamorous.

It was. It was yes. And of course the women had money for nice clothes. And they used it if they were like me.

66:41

So, why did you decide to leave?

I had a um, I left the first time because I had married my first husband and he went to work in Huddersfield and I went up with him. And I left, went back then when I married my second husband, and I left because my mother said to me, you don't want to stay in ABs any longer. You're in your mid-30s and there's no pension scheme there for you. She said, you want to get a job back, because I had worked in local government, back with the council. So I applied for a job and I got a job in Mountain Ash library, and my mother said to me, my mother being my mentor, my conscience, she said, you can't go and work in the library with your hair that colour. It's alright for the factory, but it's too blonde for the library. So you want to rinse it a bit darker. So I had a job in the library working for one of our best known poets, Harri Webb, and I was his secretary, and I worked with Harri for a couple of years and actually got married from there, and they were building this sports centre in Abercynon and the local government was being rearranged, and I applied for a job in the sports centre in Abercynon, and I was the secretary to the manager down there for 18 years. So that's why I left ABs. Not because I didn't like it any more, but because my mother said, get out of there, there's no pension.

Did they do you a kind of farewell party?

Yes, it was terrible. It was terrible. It was in the top room of the NAAFI. It was when Madonna was singing I am a virgin for the very last time....

This was ABs now?

ABs. And we had a meal. They played that song all night, and I left and went to the library in Mountain Ash, which was completely different. It was an entirely Victorian type of atmosphere, the library. So I worked in Aberdare library and this one and you were expecting Charles Dickens to come through the door at any time. The discipline was unbelievable. But of course I was militant and I can remember getting the union

involved because I felt that the head librarian was picking on a little girl who was diabetic by keeping a dossier on her, and I wouldn't put up with that so I called the union in. And after the meeting he came onto me and he said, I do like a woman with a bit of guts. So that had gone down alright.

So looking back now, how do you feel about the time you spent working in the factory?

I'd do it all over again, if it was still the same. Absolutely loved every minute and you had a tremendously supportive network there. There are times in my life when I would not have survived the tragic things that were going on, had it not been for my friends and colleagues in that factory. No, I completely endorse my time there. Wonderful, loved it.

Fantastic. Thank you very much.

70:07

END OF INTERVIEW/DIWEDD CYFWELIAD