

**VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/LLEISIAU O LAWR Y FFATRI**

**HG Stone (the toy factory) - Pontypool, Dressing Gown Factory – Blaenafon, Thorn  
Electrics – Hereford**

**Interviewee: VSE010 Brenda Mary Farr**  
**DOB: 10/7/1941**  
**Date: 29/11/2013**  
**Interviewer: Catrin Edwards on behalf of the Women's Archive of  
Wales / Archif Menywod Cymru**

Mary Farr says she was born in the village. Her dad was Norman and her mother was Grace and she has 2 brothers and a sister. Her father was a coal miner. Her great grandmother started a shop during the war and her mother helped there. Her father had a bad chest from the pit so he left and went to Saunder's Valve to work.

01:40

She went to school in New Inn and the the Wern secondary modern in Sebastapol. She left school when she was 15 in 1956. She says that you left school when you were 15 in those days. She said that she was a bit nervous about leaving and where she was going to get a job and she certainly didn't want to work at the toy factory! She didn't want to go there. She couldn't get a job but because she worked in the shop she got to know the personnel manager (of Stones the toy factory) and the factory nurse who called for her groceries. They suggested that she went there to work until she found a job.

03:20

There were quite a few people from the village working there but the workers were bused in from Abertillery and other places. MF said she had an uncle working there repairing the machines. She said she didn't want to work in the factory because she wanted to work in an office. But when a job became available in the offices she was happy where she was and didn't want to move. People's attitude towards factory workers was ok.

There were a few factories - the toy factory, Pilkington's glassworks, but everyone seemed to go to the toy to work.

4:50

The factory was called HG Stone and they made teddy bears and pandas and general soft toys. They made them for Chiltern and Marks and Spencers, but the M&S contract finished before MF finished at the factory. When asked if she had an interview for the job she says she thinks it was in the shop. She doesn't remember going down there for an interview. She was trained on the sewing machine to put the toys together for about 6 weeks she thinks, then they were moved off the training line on to another line where the women had been trained. MF said she continued with the same job all the time she was at the factory and the work was piece work. When asked if that was a good thing she says that it wasn't for her because she talks too much, so she didn't earn a lot of money.

06:58

MF says she felt happy about working in the factory when she'd been there for a while. It was a good place to work and she made lots of friends. She seemed to know a lot of people who'd been to school with her and people in the village.

07:37

MF first impressions of the factory was that it was noisy. They had to clock in. They had a cloakroom and there was an old stove burning coal or coke in the toilet. If they were cold they'd go to the toilet to warm up. She felt very nervous and the place seemed huge. It was brick built outside but it had a high metal roof, so when it rained it was noisy. She thinks a couple of hundred of them worked there and they were mainly on the machines, stuffing the toys and finishing and brushing. It was made out of flock - furry fabric - and when you sewed it the bits would stick in so someone would brush it and then you'd hardly see the seams on the toys. She repeats, it was very big, noisy, dusty. They were stuffed with straw stuff then they went on to this fine flock, but the heads of the teddies were hard straw. When asked whether they had any protective clothing, masks or earmuffs, she said laughing "No nothing. None of that. Not like today is it." She says that they wore a pinafore to work and provided it themselves.

10:14

MF says that she enjoyed the work. "It was good fun really. It would be set up like a conveyor belt. There was somebody cutting them out at the front and then they'd be putting them on the belt and you'd take off when you were ready but if you were sat at the back you took them all off because they didn't want them to go on down. Once you'd stitched one up it would go up to the next level to be stuffed."

MF says the time and motion people would come round to give you a price on what you'd earn per toy, but then they'd be talking and they'd all pile up. "On a panda you'd put two big black patches for their eyes and you'd stitch those in and if it missed, that would come

back and that would have to be repaired sometime in between doing the rest of it. But yes - I enjoyed it there. It was good fun."

11:34

MF says they could talk as much as they liked on the line, so long as they watched their fingers. There was a radio on all the time. They used to listen to "Worker's Playtime" and she thinks that the programme visited the canteen once. She says they used to make good pasties on a Thursday morning. MF says that she finished in the factory in 1964.

12:59

MF says that there were married women and single girls working in the factory. She sure that women with children would have worked there but doesn't remember any childcare facilities at the factory. Most of them would have children that had started school. She said that they used to start at 7.30 am and finish about 5 pm and that they had a clocking in machine. She says that they used to get a break in the morning and a lunch break but doesn't think there was an afternoon break. They had about 15 mins in the morning and she used to go home for lunch because she only lived up the road. The lunch break was an hour. There was canteen in the factory and MF used to have breakfast there. There was a canteen woman who made lovely pasties and they'd eat those in their morning break. The prices were reasonable since the canteen was subsidised.

15:00

MF says she was £2/12/6 when she started and it was 3/3d for her national insurance stamp. She thought it was probably good money at that time. She always handed her money over to her mother and she gave MF pocket money. She handed it all to her mother until she got married. She was given 10/- pocket money. She had to buy everything out of that - if they went out to the pictures or anything else. But she said you could do it in those days. She used to buy clothes as well, but she also made a lot of clothes because she was a skilled machinist, and her mother would make clothes for them when they were young. She could sew a little bit before she went to the factory, but that was on an old treadle. The electric machines in the factory went a good deal faster. MF doesn't remember if she had a pay rise because she was paid piece work. She says that the £2/12/6 was the basic pay, then the piece work was on top so the more you did the more you got paid. She thinks the men got paid more than she did and the women on the teddy bear aisle got more than the rest. When asked why that was, MF says that was called a specialist job, but she doesn't know why.

MF: "I haven't got a clue - no idea! They thought that was a better job to be on the teddy bears than on the other soft toys.

CE: "So you were never on the bear line?"

MF: "No - I never got that far! I talked too much."

CE: "So were people promoted to the bear line then?"

MF: "Yes - I think they were."

CE: "Was that because it was signature toy for the company?"

MF: "Yes."

18:25

MF says they used to have a sale before Christmas and you could buy toys etc. and there would be things from other places as well not just what they were making. They could buy rejects as well as good ones so they used to do their Christmas shopping then for family and friends.

19:14

MF says they started doing dolls after a bit. They made soft bodied dolls to start with. She remembers another building going up and that's where they made the plastic moulds and plastic bodies. They made the bits of plastic, then they were put together and the hair was put on. It was stitched on like on a machine.

20:12

The teddy bears went through a change as well. MF says the teddy bears' noses were embroidered on at the beginning but when they started the plastics section, they started making plastic noses. They had a stud on the back to hold it in place. MF says health and safety wouldn't allow that today (because of young children). They made dogs there as well - soft dogs. They made big dogs that were on wheels. MF says they were like baby walkers and they were a lot more expensive. She especially like the Old English Sheepdogs on the wheels.

21:28

MF says she was a member of the union, but she can't remember what union it was. They didn't ever strike and she can't remember having any problems there. MF thought that the workers were treated fairly and there were no problems with conditions. She says it always felt cold but was ok once you got going. There were heaters up in the ceiling and it was comfortable.

22:51

MF seemed to get on well with her supervisors and went to the wedding of one of them because she herself was confirmed. She was never herself though. She says that she got on with everyone - the managers, supervisors, shop stewards - she says everyone was friendly.

24:23

When asked if there were any injuries at work, MF says that everyone got a needle through their finger at some point usually if they'd been talking. Sometimes some people

had to go to casualty, but not very often. That was the main kind of injury. She wasn't aware of anyone suffering long term effects from working at the factory. She can't recall any rules and regs and thinks health and safety was non-existent.

25:47

MF thinks that the facilities were ok. "There was a long row of toilets, probably a dozen of them and this old stove where she had the fire, but there was always old Mrs Wells we always called her - she was always sat there on her stool, I can see her now. They were clean and tidy and all the time we were working our shift she'd be in sweeping out and keeping it clean." The smokers weren't allowed to smoke in the factory itself but could go out to the toilet area to smoke.

MF says there was a nurse on duty at the factory - Nurse Davies.

26:50

There were fewer men than women at the factory but MF says that when they started making the plastics, the men used to do that and there were more men employed than previously. When asked how they treated the men, she said that they just got on with it. Her uncle used to repair the machines with 2/3 others and there were men in the stores. The toys were all marked out on rolls of plush and the markers were men. The girls used to cut the fabric.

28:44

MF says that there was no shift work at the factory but sometimes there was overtime if there was a special order. But you could choose whether to do overtime or not but MF said they usually did just to get the order out because if you didn't get the order out you could lose the contract and you could be left without a job. A lot of women couldn't work overtime because they depended on the buses to bring them from far away and take them home. So the overtime was usually done by the girls that lived locally. She can't remember what the rate of pay was for overtime. She didn't mind doing overtime.

30:15

MF says that she can't remember having paid holidays but thinks they must have done. She thinks they probably had the same holidays as the miners - last week of July and first week of August. Her father was a miner and the family went on holiday together until she got married. MF says the first time she went on holiday she was about 10 and they did 4 years in Weymouth. Then they went to Torquay for 2 years and the Newquay for 2 years then her father decided to take them to a caravan in the Norfolk Broads. She talks about the holiday and learning to drive.

32:35

She says they were allowed days off for funerals and weddings but doesn't remember if their pay was stopped.

33:14

She talks about being able to walk to work in less than 5 mins. She was born and lived on the Highway and it was less than 5 mins down the road. MF says that they used to have an annual dance and that was arranged by the factory. They went to several places - Lissets in Newport, upstairs in the Angel Hotel in Abergavenny - and it was held Christmas time. MF says there were long tables and crowds of them, but by every table place there was a cigarette whether they smoked or not. The boys used to come around asking for the cigarettes of the women who didn't smoke. She says they were a good gang of women friends. "We used to go over to Abertillery over there. I always remember going over to Llanilath. They were in this Jazz band, so I thought go and give it a go but I didn't like coming back late at night and at that time you could get a bus back late at night but nowadays.... I didn't like coming home on my own late at night. Just never felt with that..... Seemed to be all the ones on my belt were from over that way."

36:38

MF says she can see the dress she made to go to one of the Christmas parties. It was a pale lilac. She thinks her mother made it. They were dinner dances with a live band. She thinks his name was Gerry Stevens but says it could have been Sheila's (Hughes) father because he was a band leader.

38:14

When asked whether she enjoyed working at the factory, MF replied yes. She said she didn't have time to be bored. She got married in 1962 to a man from Herefordshire. They were living in rented accommodation but some council houses had been built in Herefordshire so they went to Hereford to live. She didn't like it but it was a home and then she got pregnant. She wasn't given a farewell do. She thought living in Hereford was strange and it wasn't 'home'. She worked in the factory for eight years. She did leave for 6 weeks during this time and went to work in a factory in Blaenavon where they made dressing gowns because they had rented rooms in Blaenavon. But she couldn't bear the smell where they were dyeing the candlewick. Then I went to see Miss Martin and I said 'Any chance of coming back?' and she said 'Yeah.'" (she laughs) "So I went back to 'the toy' after." She agrees that she was very happy there in the end.

40:50

Between having children she worked in Thorn Electrical in Hereford, making street lights - gluing the reflector plates on.

41:20

MF is in contact with two of her former workmates from Stones. One lives around the corner. She talks about the WI for a bit and about her friend Gill who used to provide the flock to stuff the toys with. Another of her friends Val lives opposite. When asked if they still socialise, MF says "We go to pensioners'." MF says that they weren't given a pension from the factory.

42:30

When asked to look back on the years working in a factory MF says "It's the best part of your life. Yes - I enjoyed that. Different - I've had other jobs since but factory is different to retail and the other jobs I've done in between. I think we were younger and we were all much the same age - there wasn't a lot of age difference in us and it was just fun and we enjoyed it. We had good managers and you could talk to them. Mmm - I enjoyed it down there."

Pick up

43:31

When asked about her first memory of the factory, MF says:-

"I remember it being built in 1947, because of the snow. It was all dug out - the hole was dug out there - all the earth, and of course on the snow we used to go sledging down there, because it was a good tump to slide down you know. Then my mother's cousin started working there and she was very deaf so she wouldn't have heard all the noise going on all around her..... I've got a friend, she worked there then she had two sisters working there stuffing, her father and her one brother worked in the stores, the other brother worked on the marking and her mother worked in the canteen and used to make those lovely pasties that we used to get once a week. So lots of families there were more than one member of a family worked there."

MF left in 1964 and Stones changed its name to Chad Valley. Then it closed but Mr Thwaites who's been the manager started a little factory in Pontnewennid (?). However that's gone now.

Chad Valley eventually shut and was pulled down. She thinks the call for soft toys went. When she returned to Wales from Hereford, she didn't go back to work in a factory, because she had 3 children to bring up.

46:12

END OF INTERVIEW/DIWEDD CYFWELIAD