

## **LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI / VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR**

**Slimma-Dewhirst (Goodwick), Fishguard, Pembrokeshire**

**(1978 – 2002)**

**Interviewee: VSW022 (WISHES TO REMAIN ANONYMOUS)**

**Date: 30.1.14**

**Interviewer: Susan Roberts for Women's Archive Wales**

VSW022 was born in Haverfordwest on 25<sup>th</sup> July, 1962. Her father worked for the council, and her mother worked as a cleaner at the Evans, Willimams office. VSW022 is the eldest of three children, and has one brother and one sister.

VSW022 went to school in Letterton, then in Fishguard and went on to Fishguard High School. She enjoyed swimming the most at school, and left when she was sixteen. She felt sad when she was leaving, as it meant leaving her friends behind. Before she left school the manager of Slimma-Dewhirst had visited the school and offered her a “sewing” job. He had gone around the school and told her that she could go in the following Monday. She felt a bit nervous at the prospect of starting work.

She had an interview at the factory, where they asked her if she'd ever used a sewing machine. They showed her how to bar tack, and told her she could start the following week. Her parents were pleased.

When she was eighteen her father died, and she was taken home by people from work.

She remembers her first day, and remembers the noise of the machines. She did know somebody there, a girl called Ros, when she started, and remembers that there were many, many people working there.

The supervisor showed her what to do. Her first job was bar tacking. She then progressed to turning garments and the loop machine. VSW022 said the work was difficult. She wanted to do the job, and doesn't know what else she would have done if she hadn't gone to the factory to work.

VSW022's pay was £141 a week, and she was happy with this salary. Initially, she was paid in cash, but later on they would receive a slip and the money would be paid into the bank. She used some of her money to pay her mother rent.

When the Manager had come round the school he had wanted to see VSW022's CV. VSW022 didn't do any exams before leaving school, and therefore left without qualifications.

VSW022 considers the work at the factory to have been a good job. She made good friends there and people looked after each other. VSW022 didn't like the heat inside the factory and felt it was too hot for her when she was sat at the machine.

00.12.10: She says, 'They were very good to me at the factory'. Apart the heat, she liked every aspect of working there. Of the different jobs that VSW022 did at the factory, she liked the work on the machine the best. Turning garments involved standing up all day long, but working at the machine meant that she could sit down.

There were young girls and older women working there. The factory had a shop next door where workers could buy discounted garments. VSW022 thinks the discount was approximately 50%. They sold trousers, shoes, cardigans. When VSW022 started at the factory there were no men working on the machines. They would normally do the pressing. There were both men and women doing the turning of garments.

Occasionally workers would be sacked because they weren't producing enough work, and couldn't reach the targets. They would be told that they had to leave or be sacked.

When VSW022 was turning garments she would take the sew bars off the inside of the trousers, and then it turn them out, ready for the pressers to do their work. VSW022 would panic occasionally if she was behind with her targets but when that was the case somebody would come and help her.

There was training for workers at the factory. They would erect a little screen around the workers in a training area. The supervisor would be responsible for the training. VSW022 considers the training to have been very difficult. She was put on a flat machine doing back stitch and couldn't do it. (It involved operating the machine with the knee.) As a result, she was taken off this job and put on another job. On one occasion the motion of the flat machine, swinging the knee, made VSW022 feel sick and she had to go to the sick room.

VSW022 would start work at eight o'clock in the morning. She travelled to work by bus. It was a special works bus and she would catch it at half past seven in the morning in order to start work at eight o'clock. She had to pay three pounds for the bus and this money would be taken out of her wages. Later on, she would get a lift into work with a colleague from Wolf's Cross. VSW022 would finish work at six o'clock. There would be a break at ten o'clock. The lunch hour was between one and two o'clock. There was a canteen there, although VSW022 took sandwiches in for her lunch as her mother would make her food when she got home. The canteen provided breakfast in the morning, and make a 'cooked dinner' lunch time. There was also a break at three o'clock.

It was possible to work longer hours if workers chose to do so, but VSW022 preferred to go home at six o'clock.

Workers were required to clock in and clock out. When VSW022 started there was a clocking machine with clock in cards in the entrance. This system was replaced with a time sheet with tickets which you put with your time sheet in order to get paid. The wages were pay-rolled from Swansea. Wages were docked for workers arriving late.

When VSW022's mother was ill with cancer, VSW022 wanted time off work to be with her but work insisted her mother was fine, therefore she feels they lacked sympathy, because their main priority was getting the work done.

VSW022 was on a low rate of pay, and says that the office was 'making up' her money. She would spend the money on food and clothes.

At Christmas time there would be a raffle and the factory would be decorated. There was a union at the factory and VSW022 was a member, although membership wasn't compulsory. If she had a problem she would go and speak to the supervisor. Her machine broke down once. The belt came off and it caught fire. There was smoke coming out of it. She had to wait a week for the machine to be repaired, and had to turn garments during this time.

Occasionally there was a mistake with the pay, and as a consequence the workers would be unhappy. VSW022 feels that the workers were treated fairly.

VSW022 felt proud that she was making clothes for Marks and Spencer. As well as trousers they made shorts too. She hated the pink and blue shorts that they started making.

Initially, VSW022 would wear an overall to work, but stopped wearing this as it was too hot in the factory, and just wore old clothes. Work didn't provide her with any clothing for working at the factory.

VSW022 considers the work to have been dangerous. She lost a finger nail using the sewing machine. She went to thread the machine and her nail got stuck. She went up to the Health Centre in Fishguard to have it treated, but as a result of the injury couldn't use a sewing machine in work. There was no nurse in the factory but a first aider would see to injuries. While her finger was injured another worker used her machine and she would sit down and watch. They paid VSW022 compensation for the injury, although this wasn't much. She had a stitch and a bandage on the injury and therefore couldn't do her work.

VSW022 remembers that there were Health and Safety regulations, and that drinks weren't allowed on the factory floor. Smoking wasn't allowed on the factory floor. Bags were not permitted on the factory floor because of Health and Safety regulations. Bags were put in lockers. There were also concerns about theft. One of the 'girls' left her wages on her sewing machine and her pay packet stolen. The factory paid her again to cover the loss of the missing wages. The pay packet would be brought around the factory floor in a box. Later on, wage slips were issued and workers would have to collect them from the office.

The supervisor was the person in charge of Health and Safety. A woman called Wendy (a cousin of VSW022's) was a supervisor at the factory, and would insist that bags were kept off the floor to prevent people falling over them. The workers were not permitted to leave their coats on the back of the chairs. She considers that they were quite strict at the factory.

00.40.04: The factory was cold in the winter and hot in the summer, but it was well lit in order for the workers to sew. There was a radio playing over the tannoy system (possibly Radio One). VSW022 wasn't allowed to talk while she worked because it would affect her targets and the targets of the person she was speaking to. She would have a row if she was caught talking and would be told to go back to her machine. She would talk to the girls during her dinner break.

There was dust on the sewing machines, and when VSW022 would 'blow' the machine down the dust would go on her chest. As a consequence, she had to have a mask but she would take the mask off because she felt too hot wearing it. The workers were responsible for cleaning their machines, every day before they went home. That would take approximately five minutes and would involve 'blowing it all down' with a blower, and polishing it. Cleaners at the factory would clean the floor.

Representatives from Marks and Spencer would visit the factory and they would have to clean everything in preparation for the visit. The woman from Marks and Spencer inspected the loops that VSW022 was making and told her that she was doing very well.

VSW022 would get teased a lot by the men. She supported Liverpool football club and they would tease her about this.

VSW022 worked a four day week, Monday to Thursday. She had two weeks of holidays during the summer, a week off at Whitsun, and a long weekend off for Easter. These holidays were paid leave. It was a thirty nine hour week. Over time was available but was optional. The factory shut down for two weeks during the summer. There was also a week off in October, and a week off at Christmas time. VSW022 would usually spend her time off at home helping her mother although she did go on a bus tour with her mother once to Llandudno. She never went on holidays with any of the girls from work.

VSW022 went to a local pub, the Rose and Crown, with the girls from work one, when she was eighteen. They gave her vodka and she was too drunk to go back onto the machine. (This was one lunch time.) The bosses in work were 'disgusted' with her and warned her not to go to the pub again. VSW022 claims she didn't know she was drinking vodka. The bosses in work could smell the alcohol on her breath. She never did it again.

Travelling to work on the bus in the morning took half an hour.

VSW022 went on a work's trip to Cheddar Gorge once. There would be a Christmas party in the Bay Hotel. The workers would have to pay, and would have a bus to take them home. Half of the girls were drunk according to VSW022, although she wasn't drunk herself. There was no social club in work.

VSW022 remembers an open day at the factory when people were allowed to come in and have a look at what they were doing. The supervisor showed them round and there was a good turn out.

VSW022 feels very sad that the factory eventually closed down and hasn't worked since. She would have liked to be working there today. She would get bored working there sometimes because the work was monotonous. She asked for a change on one of these occasions and they were able to accommodate her.

When VSW022 was turning garments she would be working with ribbed trousers which made her hand sore.

The workers were called together and told that the factory was closing in 2002. The Job Centre people visited not long after this to tell them they would have to go on 'Job Seekers' Allowance'. The closure of the factory was a shock to VSW022. She felt sad and worried. She is still on Jobseekers' Allowance. She also receives Disability Allowance every four weeks. She is still looking for a job and would like to get a cleaning job.

VSW022 is still in contact with some of the girls from the factory. She describes her time at the factory as a good time in her life. She had fun with the girls who worked there. There would be a raffle at Easter, summer time and Christmas time. She organised the raffle. (The supervisor would get the stuff and put it all out.)

00.57.33: VSW022 describes the presentation photograph. She is seen being presented with a watch in the photograph, for twenty years service. She worked there for a total of twenty three years. If it re-opened today she would like to go back to the factory.

Duration: 58'30"