

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/ LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI

**Slimma-Dewhirst Factory in Cardigan 1971 – 1973
& Goodwick, Fishguard 1973 – 2004**

Interviewee: VSW024 (WISHES TO REMAIN ANONYMOUS)
Date of Birth: 25th December 1955
Date: 30.1.14
Interviewer: Susan Roberts on behalf of Women's Archive of Wales

VSW024 was born in Aber village. Her father was working on the harbour. Her mother didn't go out to work. She went to school at Goodwick primary school, and she went to Fishguard Secondary School. She didn't like school because she had hearing difficulties. It's an inherited condition that runs in the family. At school she was told she would need to concentrate more, but she couldn't do this as she couldn't hear what was being said, and as a consequence she never bothered much.

She was fifteen years old when she left school and already had a job to go to, working at the Slimma factory in Cardigan. She had to attend an interview to get the job. As a consequence she worked in the factory in Cardigan before transferring to the one in Goodwick.

There had been an open day in school with local employers and the children had to choose where they wanted to go. VSW024 put her name down for a job in Slimma and therefore got the interview for the job in Cardigan.

A gang of girls went for the interview, approximately six of them, and a bus was laid on for them for Slimma. After VSW024 did the interview she had to go and do some tests. She was then tested on the machine. When they said she had passed, they said they would let her know when she could start. So she left school in July and started work the following August.

She remembers her first day. She was put in a training room where she trained for six weeks with the other five girls, although they were all training to do different jobs, although most of them went in to machining. A couple went in to do "passing". VSW024 went in to use the machine.

One of the initial tests she had was to determine whether she was quicker with her left or right hand, and to see how quick she was in order to decide where on the line to put her. When she first went on the line, she went at the end in order to finish off the waistbands. After that job finished to went on to make pockets. When she moved down to Goodwick she was making the beginning of the trousers on an overlocker on a three or four threader, and doing every part of the garment.

00.08.08: ‘Because I was at the beginning of the line, so I had to make sure that work gets past me so the rest can do all their work, so they can earn all their money. When it comes to it, I had to do thousands, and thousands of them.’

VSW024 did feel the pressure sometimes. She said,

00.08.23: ‘You do get a little pressure but when you see all the work there you’ve just got to do it... When you see it’s all gone, it’s a good feeling.’

During the six weeks training period the supervisor would bring work in from the factory floor for the trainees to complete. If the girls got up to a certain level they were put out on to the factory floor, so some girls completed the training before others. VSW024 says she lagged behind because the work was set up for a right-handed person and she’s left-handed.

She felt slightly nervous on her first day, because she didn’t know what to expect, and when she got on to the factory floor she describes the experience as ‘horrible’.

00.10.33: ‘There were trousers everywhere.’

As far as the work load is concerned she said, **‘if you didn’t do a 75 or 100 performance they would be on to you all the time, until they get you up to where they want you and then they leave you alone.’**

00.11.08: ‘I would have preferred to go somewhere else than work in a factory. I wanted to do catering, but I wasn’t old enough.’

She needed to be sixteen to go to college and had to find something in the mean time.

00.11.40: ‘Once I got there and got the hang of it I didn’t bother leaving.... Because I was getting money I didn’t bother to leave’

The factory in Fishguard made trousers, shorts, denim jeans – different types of trousers. They did have a go at making skirts. The garments were made for Marks and Spencers.

VSW024’s cousin was working in the factory when she started there, but she didn’t know many other people there. Before starting there she wasn’t asked for a reference because she came straight from school.

00.12.58: ‘I came straight from school and it was my one and only job that I had to do.’

In order to get to Cardigan in the morning she had to catch the bus at half past seven to get there by half past eight. She would finish at approximately half past four or five o'clock, and would be home by about six o'clock. She worked four full days and half a day on a Friday. The factory in Cardigan concentrated more on making 'denim'. There would be a morning break and half an hour lunch time. There was a ten minute afternoon break.

VSW024 says she did find the work tiring and would feel 'shattered' in the evening.

00.15.02: 'It was tedious during the day, doing it, doing the same thing all the time over, and it was tiring but if you wanted the money you had to do it.'

VSW024 changed lines several times, depending on where she was sent, wherever the supervisor wanted her to go. She didn't want to change because it would take time to build up speed on a new job, and therefore affect her earnings.

00.15.55: 'I didn't enjoy it .. I was there for thirty three years.'

VSW024 used to sew a bit before starting there but says that doing industrial work is different because the machines are industrial, heavy, sewing machines.

00.16.32: 'They put you in place and that's where you had to stay with them.'

VSW024 was tempted to leave. She had all her papers in place to go to the air force but in the end she didn't want to leave home.

She stayed at the Cardigan factory before moving to the factory near Fishguard. There were quite a few men working in the factories doing jobs such as the cutting and pressing.

00.18.32: 'They were all skilled work, no matter what you put on. There was a skill to do. The simplest of jobs was a skill.'

Towards the end of her time at the factory, the trousers would come down to her on a conveyor belt. She would do her job and pass it down to the next person without even having to get up.

The workers were paid a basic wage but if they could reach their target they were paid more, so in effect they were always working on a piece work basis. VSW024 could reach her targets but VSW022 couldn't so she would just receive her basic wage.

00.19.47: 'You have to keep the line going. That's the main thing.'

After the initial training period there was no other training offered, and no real chance to improve on skills.

When she started she was taking eleven pounds in wages home. She would give her mother some of the money and keep the rest. She started saving up for a car. They were given a pay rise every year.

The pressers, who were normally men, would be paid more than the machinists. There was a factory shop offering 'second' garments at cut prices. VSW024 bought quite a bit of stuff from here as she would get trousers at cost price then.

There was a union at the factory. VSW024 thinks it was called the GMB. It was not a closed shop and membership was not compulsory. She was not a member when she first started working for Slimma but when she went to Fishguard, 'they kept on' at her to join, so she joined.

00.23.12: 'It didn't do anything for me though.'

If VSW024 had a problem she preferred to speak out and sort it out herself. She would go straight to the management by going to Personnel. They did solve problems for her a few times but sometimes it was like talking to a brick wall, and wouldn't take any notice.

00.24.25: 'They should have taken more notice of the ones who'd been there a long time and not the ones who'd just come in. They were taking more notice of the ones coming than the ones that was already there. ... If your face fit, you're alright. If your face don't fit, that's it.'

There were a few disputes. They tended to be about working conditions. VSW024 thinks the workers were treated fairly.

00.26.28: 'I just took them in my stride. Whatever they said to me went over my head. That's me.'

00.26.41: 'They didn't have much call to pick on me. But they always put me where there was a pile of work, so I could get it done and go back to the other job.'

VSW024 feels as if she was carrying other workers sometimes. '

They put a team working line in which meant that they counted how much the team had done rather than how much the individual worker had done, and VSW024 considers that this was a con.

00.27.34: 'They was always cracking the whip. They always wanted more than you could do, always.'

VSW024 never felt intimidated or scared of supervisors, or management.

'If I wanted to say something, I'd say it. If I knew I was in the right, I'd get the last word'.

They didn't wear a uniform but wore their own clothes. Later on, the factory provided VSW024 with one overall, but that's all she ever got. Some of the jobs were dirty. Using an overlocker machine was dusty and dirty work. Work with a fire threader was also dirty and dusty work. The colour would come off some of the material onto the hands, and the face.

You could have a mask if you wanted one, but VSW024 didn't like using one because she felt she couldn't breathe.

The work could be dangerous. Needles would go into fingers, and you could end up with a button on the end of the thumb. This happened to VSW024.

00.30.12: 'I was doing buttons. The machine had clogged so I went in to see if I could get the button out but my foot slipped and down it went. And there was the button. (ON HER FINGER.) It (THE MACHINE) worked afterwards though.'

VSW024 just cut the button off.

00.30.54: 'If you have a needle through your finger, through your nail you know about it. ... They say you're not a qualified machinist until you've had a needle through your finger.'

She had a needle through her thumb when she was doing blind hemming. Accidents happened, even to experienced girls, possibly through losing concentration or tiredness. There was a first aider in the factory and there were quite a few people who had injuries. One was on a pocket machine and got their hand stuck. It took a while to free him. VSW024 doesn't know if workers were compensated for accidents. If somebody got a needle through their finger, it would be removed, and then they would be expected to carry on working.

One of the rules at the factory was that you had to wear eye goggles when using the machine if it didn't have a guard. Later on, there was a guard on every machine anyway. When VSW024 first started there were no guards on the machines.

They did have Health and Safety people at the factory, with different people who went around to check on things. They would be looking for things like a loose wire, or anything else you could get caught up in.

There were strip lights above in the factory, and a light on the machine. The factory was warm when they had the loading doors closed, but went cold as soon as these were opened. The loading doors would be opened to take finished garments away and to bring in more blocks of material.

The girls used to note how much work they'd done on tickets, although some did try and fiddle this. If they were caught though, they would be dismissed.

When VSW024 worked in Goodwick, she went home for lunch due to the proximity of her home, or sometimes she would take some sandwiches.

00.37.35: 'I never used to bother with anybody. I used to be on my own most of the time... Because I couldn't hear, .. I never used to bother. Once my hearing aids were turned off I couldn't hear anything, so I had to turn them off on the factory floor, ... and then when I came out I put them on and I could hear.'

VSW024 didn't really feel lonely. She said, 'I've been so used to being on my own, it doesn't really bother me. I don't like being in a crowd. I spend a lot of time on my own, so it doesn't matter how many people are there.'

VSW024 says she did get people in the factory trying to draw her into the crowd, but she insisted she was okay on her own.

VSW024 says she used to take her hearing aids out when she went to work, as she couldn't hear people there any way. The girls didn't have a chance to talk while they worked anyway. She says, 'they would come after you' if girls were sitting around talking and doing nothing.

VSW024 thinks that working at the factory has given her a bad back. She's got deteriorating discs which she thinks was caused by sitting down in the same position all the time. She doesn't know anybody who has ever been paid compensation for long term effects suffered as a consequence of working in the factory.

VSW024 remembers that the men and women used to tease each other. She worked four and a half days a week, when she first started. It then went down to four days. She worked from eight o'clock to six o'clock at the time she finished. She had to clock in and clock out. She was always running late when she worked in Goodwick. She was never told off for this as there was no problem if you got your target.

There was a fifteen minute break in the morning but you could carry on working if you wanted to. VSW024 would have two weeks holiday during the summer, one week at Whitsun, a week in October and ten days at Christmas time. She would have bank holidays off as well. There was a factory shut down during the summer, at the end of July and beginning of August. Some of the factory girls would go on holiday together. She would go away with the family.

When VSW024 was in Goodwick she took five to ten minutes to get to work by car. There would be a Christmas party and the workers would sometimes go on trips. These would be organised by the committee of the social club. If a trip was arranged they would collect the money needed. She went on a few trips, but not many. She didn't like them.

Christmas time at the factory was pandemonium. They would set a target and once this was reached everybody would stop working and have a drink in the factory. There would be a Christmas dinner in the canteen, and also have a Christmas do outside the factory. VSW024 went to a couple but was not fussed on these events.

00.47.06: 'I'm not interested in any of that see.'

VSW024 would prefer to sit at her computer or read.

Marks and Spencers would come and visit nearly every other week, to check how the order was going. This was a time when everybody was supposed to be on their best behaviour. VSW024 didn't feel nervous at the prospect of being watched by the people from M & S and just got on with her work. They would sometimes speak to the girls on the machines, and ask what their opinions about the trousers they were making.

00.48.45: ‘When one lot of trousers came down I said [to the management] I wouldn’t use them for dusters... They asked my opinion so I give it.’

Collections would be made for people leaving the factory, or getting married but this used to get on VSW024’s nerves and she didn’t contribute as she thought that she’d earned her money and she was going to keep it for herself. She thinks that they thought she was tight fisted.

VSW024 worked in the factory for thirty three years, until she was made redundant. (She left in 2001.)

00.51.13: ‘I thought I had a job there for life.’

They closed individual factories first but the Fishguard factory was the last one to close. They were given ninety days notice. VSW024 felt devastated because she didn’t know where her next wage would come from. She has been ‘on the sick’ ever since as she lost the use of her legs, and couldn’t walk for a while. She is walking now but has to use a stick most of the time. She had acupuncture and injections in her back in order to alleviate the problem. She is now suffering with her hands – she is losing the feeling in her hands – and believes it is a rheumatic problem.

VSW024 isn’t in contact with any of her former colleagues.

VSW024 thinks if the factory was still open now she would still be there.

00.54.27: ‘I did enjoy it, after a fashion... I miss it really, more than anything. I miss going in to work and sitting down and doing what you have to do... They weren’t really company for me but I could see different people there see. ’