

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/ LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI

A belt factory in Ynysmeudwy (2½ years) and then a powder puff (Revlon) factory,
Pontardawe (c. 2½ years).

Interviewee: VSW029 (WISHES TO REMAIN ANONYMOUS)

Date of interview: Unknown

Interviewer: Eugena Hopkins on behalf of Women's Archive Wales

The speaker was born in Pontardawe and she's lived there all her life. She attended 'the Welsh school' in Pontardawe – it's a Welsh school now but English children used to go there. Then she went to Ynysmeudwy school and from there **'I wasn't lucky enough to pass the scholarship, so I had to come out of school – my father wasn't well at the time, so I had to come out of school and I had to go to a factory to work.'** This was her first job – she worked in a factory in Ynysmeudwy – which made belts. She got the job there because her cousin who lived next door worked there, **'but it was easy to get a job years ago. There wasn't much of an interview. You were just lucky – if they liked your face they gave you the job.'**

She didn't need any qualifications. Her job in the factory – to start with there was some machinery there – these were only used for making the eyelets in the belts. She was lucky enough, after she'd been there a year to be made into a supervisor there. **'So I was watching all the packaging and making sure everything was right before it went out.'** The speaker doesn't remember her first day in the factory – she wasn't very nervous because she knew she had her cousin there. **The perks with the job was that she could take some belts home and make them in the house, and I was having a bit of extra money with that, because I was only having £1 6s 1d a week. And my mother had the pound and I had the six and a penny.'**

Did you enjoy the work?

Yes, I didn't mind at all. Enjoyed the money I did, I think.

About twenty women worked there and there was one gent there too. They were all young girls, no married women. There was only the Manager and his wife – over them. She wasn't encouraged to go to night school. She didn't receive extra money for being a supervisor. The only extra money was when she took the belts home to make.

There was no union in the factory. No strikes or disputes. There was no one you could complain to.

4.35

Did you feel you were treated fairly?

No, not a lot. The two of them – Jews they were, and they made sure we worked.

She didn't have a uniform. She doesn't think the work was dangerous in any way – **'just the smell of the glue – it was very, very strong. It was a liquid glue ... there was an awful smell with it, very very strong.'** She can't remember anyone having an accident in the factory. There weren't any rules and regulations **'We just got on with our work.'** There was natural light coming into the factory. There was a toilet there 'as far as I remember', and **'we had our food in the place where we were working.'** They took their own sandwiches – there was no canteen. There was no background music. There were three machines for the people doing the eyelets, 'but there was no noise there really'. They could chat when working **'as long as it wasn't too long. They were ?up behind you all the time.'** She doesn't think they were allowed to smoke when working. **'I don't think anyone did smoke then. I don't remember. I didn't myself so ..'** The factory has not affected her health long term.

There was only one man in the factory **'we used to tease him quite a lot.'** She was only fifteen years of age when she went to work there. She worked for five days a week but can't remember her hours. There were no shifts and she didn't have to clock in and clock out. They only had one break during the day – for lunch. She thinks they had a fortnight off like all the factories had. She can't remember whether she was paid during the holiday.

8.47

She doesn't think they went away on holiday then. (Phone rings)

Were you allowed a day off then – say - to a funeral?

Well, women didn't go to funerals then – years ago.

The speaker caught the bus to work – only a few stops. There were no social activities associated with the factory **'Gosh, no!'**

When asked again whether she enjoyed working there – she says she didn't mind and she made a lot of friends there. There were some from Clydach there too.

She worked in the belt factory at Ynysmeudwy for about two and a half years. **‘Then they carried on – the factory closed and we went down to a factory ... it was somewhere down by the chemy, I don’t know exactly what the chemy meant. But they built a factory down there and I worked there and we were making powder puffs for the Revlon – Revlon make they were. They were pink with a satin back to them, I remember.’**

The conditions were a little bit better here – she thinks they had to clock in here. **‘The only perk we had there, sometimes we had a lipstick given us. But I didn’t like the flavour, the sme ..., the taste of it, so I was always giving mine away, I didn’t really like the lipstick ...’**

All the workers from the belt factory moved down to this factory. There were quite a few extra workers here – there was a downstairs and an upstairs. She still worked as a supervisor in this factory too, but she still had to know how to do the powder puffs and things, and she still had to make sure that she packed them and sent them off – she can’t remember where they were sent. There were no more men here – just the same people moved down. **‘It was a cleaner job because we didn’t have the smell of the glue with it.’** They must have been using some sort of glue here too – but she can’t remember what it was.

They had more wages in this factory, but she can’t remember how much. From her wage packet she used to save up and buy her clothes and things. She still had to give money to her mother but she always bought something extra which her mother couldn’t afford to buy for her.

13.15

The speaker had two sisters – **but they were lucky enough to pass the eleven plus and they stayed on in school for a little while, and both of them had a job in Boots.**

*How did they think of you then as being working in a factory?
Oh, they didn’t mind at all.’*

She worked in the powder puff factory until she got married. Then she left. – Contradicts herself – she did get married but she went back to work in the factory for a twelve month. Then ‘I fell’ she was carrying (with child) and she wasn’t well and she had to go up to Ystalyfera to live – and because she was living up there she couldn’t travel because she was having sickness. **‘That was the end of my job then. I was nearly twenty. And I didn’t go back to work there at all.’**

She did keep in contact with some of the girls.

Asked how she feels now about working in the two factories

‘Well, it was an experience, I can say, that’s all. You know, I mean it didn’t help me along, I’ve done other things since. I haven’t worked in a factory since.’