

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

### Courtaulds (1964-1976)

**Interviewee:** VN028 Vicky Perfect

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**Interviewer:** Kate Sullivan on behalf of Women's Archive Wales

Vicky confirmed her name, address and date of birth as 03/01/1949.

She left school at 15, though her headmaster wanted her to stay on because he thought she could get seven o-levels. **But she says her mother was brought up in a different era when boys were expected to stay on and girls to go out to work, so she had to work.** Vicky is one of eight children. She went to school in the Central School in Flint. Her mother was a housewife and her father worked in the Shotton Steelworks.

**When she left school, Vicky felt 'very bitter' because she had to leave but said she had to do as she was told.** She started work in Mayfairs, a clothing factory, making duffle coats, although since the age of 13 she'd been working in a café in Rhyl, waiting on tables during the school holidays and at weekends. She went to Rhyl on the train and had gone round asking at the cafés if they wanted staff. **She didn't open her wage packet, it had to be handed over to her mother unopened, and she'd give her a little bit of it back.** This was totally different to her own two daughters when they were grown up who gave her something out of their wages for their keep.

She started work in 1964 and she said she just turned up and asked for a job. **"When I started work, you could get one job in the morning, another one dinner time if you didn't like that one, maybe another one shortly after dinner, and a fourth one before the day was over. It was booming, there was work there for everybody. You never heard of many people on the dole, as it was."**

Vicky was nearly the youngest of her siblings and the last one to go out to work; her younger brother went to university. When she was sixteen, the Mayfair duffle coat factory where she was working closed and was taken over by Courtaulds and they took all the staff on. She went onto a shift system at first at the new factory, six till two and two till ten. **"Then I think they saw something in me cos I was offered a job in the work study department."** Her brother at university showed her how to use a slide rule during the two week shut down in Courtaulds over the summer holidays and she remembers going to her interview and the person giving her a sum that was ten digits long and he was amazed when she came up with the answer

straight away using the slide rule “because I was from the factory floor, don't forget, and he looked at me quite taken aback when I got the right answer. He said 'I'll just give you this other one,' and I said 'Yeah, go on then.’”

In Mayfair, she said she'd been in quite an enclosed environment; in Courtaulds, she was on the top floor of a four story building, and though there was machinery below, she just got on with the sewing, and there was a radio on and they'd sing along. “The only time you met up with anybody working on the factory floor was on your breaks because there was so many working, eight thousand between Deeside and Aber, and they'd stagger your breaks.” Dinner break was half an hour and you'd perhaps say hello to someone either coming or going back to their machines. “And when you went to work with them, you were in the noise then that you'd only skirted through and it was like a big wake up call, to the conditions that they worked in downstairs. They had to work faster and everything, we were like cosseted upstairs, cos you had targets to meet. You had to do so many cones, viscose, rayon and wool, and you had to do thirty in an hour or whatever, you had to keep the machines going.”

Vicky worked initially, not on these machines, but in the 'sewing bit,' upstairs. **She said people couldn't let their ends go down on the machines; say, they were looking after 60 ends and they came back from lunch and 30 had 'gone down.'** The machines were winding up the yarns out of bobbins and if they broke you had to tie them in a special knot that they'd showed you how to do, and the knot had to be on the end of the cone so that they could count how many knots were on the 'cheese,' the larger one. **You could only have about eight knots she said but you couldn't leave the machines because you could never catch up with your work when you got back.** The machines were going all the time till ten o'clock at night when they were switched off. In the Deeside mill there were three shifts, instead of the two in the other two mills, and the men used to do the night shift from ten till six. **The women only did the morning and afternoon shifts.** Vicky said you had to leave the machine with most of the ends running cos the men wouldn't catch up either.

“You'd have to do 30 of them (cones?) in an hour and you'd have boxes you'd put the 'cheeses' in and then you'd start another one.” The 'cheese' was the yarn and it had to go onto 'cones' so that it could be taken away and knitted into jumpers etc.

12.50 **When she started at Courtaulds, Vicky had a short interview of about ten minutes: “Basically, are you healthy? We'll just measure you, take your weight, give you an eyesight test, right, you've got a job. Not like it's done now.”** Vicky started in the clothing factory on the top and they paid her 50p on a Saturday morning and they used to work on the machines doing 'intricate' patterns using a piece of paper with a circle or a square on it, operating the sewing machine around this pattern. **They used to get a box of ten duffle coats to put these patterns on, which were passed along the line to different parts of the coat. She remembers doing a duffle coat, the back bit, “and I couldn't understand why the fourth one kept coming back at me. I'd sown my finger in it, I was going that fast!”** The needle had gone through her finger and she hadn't even felt it. **She just cut the thread, repaired the garment, and carried on, without reporting it, as there was no health and safety then.**

She 'sort of knew' how to sew before she started at Courtaulds: “I'm a strange sort of person like that, if I want to do something, I can do it, you know, if I set my mind to it because I'm focussed like that.” But Vicky didn't really want to go into a factory, but wanted to stay on at school. Her husband, years later, advised her to go back to studying and she ended up doing an advanced diploma with Oxford University. **“I'd have like to have achieved it at fifteen but I was brought up in a totally different world. Girls were very undervalued, my mum was a home-maker, that was her role.”** She admires her mother now and is amazed at how she brought up eight children in

a three bedroom house with no bathroom. The tin bath was brought into the kitchen on a Friday and she was the last to go in “but I liked it all soapy and, of course, because you were so poor you didn't have nighties, you wore one of your dad's old shirts.” When she started at Courtaulds not all the children were at home, the three eldest had left.

**She can't remember what she earned when she was on the factory floor but in the work study department her wages were £23, in cash, and she gave the packet unopened to her mother, who would keep the £20 and give her £3, out of which she had to buy all her own clothes from her mother's catalogue. So out of the £3, Vicky used to give her mother a pound to pay for them and she'd spend the rest on a Friday or Saturday night when she went out.** She still worked in the café at the weekends and bank holidays and the two week factory shutdown and she had to give this wage to her mother too, unopened. Her mother paid her fare to Rhyl and the owner of the café, Tony, advised her to ask her mother if she could keep the tips. Her mother asked how much the tips were and Vicky said about 50p and she said OK. “But what she didn't realise was that this Tony had taught me how to wait on tables like first class and I'd make three times what I was giving her in tips.” She used to have a little pig in her bedroom in which she used to put this money and she never told her mother.

**22.00 She remembers her very first day in Mayfair, which was later taken over by Courtaulds, as 'scary, exciting cos you were grown up, because you wasn't going to school any more, and there was like this tinge of disappointment, but you still felt grown up. And you walked in there and there were all these girls with rollers in their hair and scarves on, cos that's how they used to go to work then cos they were going out at night, and you were like this little person coming in and someone showed you to your sewing machine and you started off with something really simple do to for the first few weeks until they could see how good you was, or not. You'd start off just doing sides or the tabards for the duffle coats, and when they could see you could do straight lines sewing they'd give you something more complicated to do.'**

Some of the girls who were in the same class as her in school started in Courtaulds at the same time. They just slotted in, she said, there wasn't any bullying although there was often an occasion when one of the older women would say “**Vicky, you wouldn't just do these ten? I won't be long, just going for a cigarette, cos I didn't smoke, you know, and you'd land up doing theirs, co they could see who was 'accommodating' shall we say.**” Vicky knew they were skiving but she did it anyway because she was brought up in a world where “you did what you were told.”

Her hours at Mayfair was 8am till 4pm, but she used to do overtime sometimes, on work for Greenfield Courtaulds, covers for going over machines. During the shutdown, they used to clean the machines and they wanted these covers to go over these machines. On day, Vicky and three others were chosen to stay behind and do these covers on the overlocking machine and she says, when everyone else had clocked off, there were piles of material stacked up to the roof. One of the girls dared Vicky to claim up to the top of them and she did, but the bales of cloth separated and she couldn't get down again and the girls had to get one of the security men to help her. She didn't get disciplined because nobody told on her, the security man just said not to do it again. When the foreman came in the next day he was so pleased they'd done so much work, but they'd worked especially hard to make up for the time lost when they were playing about. There was no supervisor on when they were doing overtime. She didn't work at the factory at weekends because she worked in the Rhyl café, and she had to get up at 6am to catch the 6.50 train.

The factory itself appeared at the time to her clean and nice but looking back she realises it was dusty and there were bits of material all over the floor, where bits had been cut off, and these were swept up at the end of the day. She thinks it wouldn't be like this today. **There were a lot of**



minutes when she worked at the Aber works. She worked in Deeside, when she was in Mayfair; and when it closed she went to the 'top' works, i.e the Aber works, which had only just reopened after the war and there was the coning room and the packing department. There, they had to order when they wanted for lunch in the morning when they arrived and they brought it to them to a little canteen in a corner of the room. She said some people weren't bothered about leaving the machines and the supervisor used to be chasing them up.

**She was a trade union rep later on**, and she remembers being called over to the Deeside works because one of the lads had put a plank of wood in the conveyor belt as a prank and the belt had stopped and something had broken. They were going to sack him and Vicky fought for him, saying they couldn't sack him as she didn't know anything about him and she was the union rep. If they wanted to sack him, they'd have to get another union rep, who did know the boy, out of bed as it was the night shift (though she said she got the call at 5pm) and they wouldn't do that, so his job was saved. Vicky said they couldn't sack him as a) she didn't know him and b) the man who was dealing with it, the personnel officer, didn't have the authority, though of course he did. But the next week, this boy did the same thing again and Vicky wouldn't go down there a second time.

**44.00 There were union reps on each shift and Vicky was the youngest of them in the whole factory. When she was 19, she was picked to go to a trades union conference in London and she was the youngest one there too.** She was a member of the TGWU but doesn't know why she got picked to be a rep, just that someone said 'Oh, Vicky'll do that.' She had to go to meetings, internal and external, for instance, if the factory wanted the workers to work a Saturday morning cleaning the machines, they'd have to get the union in and tell them that, then the union would call a meeting on the shop floor, and explain what it was that the company wanted, and get their views. Nobody ever refused and Vicky says everyone was very compliant in those days, there were some 'agitators' but she never came across them and most people just got on with the job. **She was paid about a pound extra a week to be a union rep. She can remember only one strike but can't remember what it was about, though thinks it might be about the heat in the Aber works during summer, which had a glass roof that had to be painted green to keep the sun out, and they used to bring a salt drink when it got too hot that looked like orange juice. On this occasion, she thinks it was so hot that the workers thought it was too hot and wanted to strike. Everyone came out, nobody had a choice, and they all went and sat on the tennis courts thinking 'this is good' until they got their pay package and found out they'd been stopped an hour's wages.** There was nothing done about the heat because there wasn't much that could be done, she said. She doesn't know about any strikes in any of the other factories - Courtaulds had four at the time she worked there; Aber, Deeside, Castle and Greenfields.

When she was 20, she went to work in the work study department and one of her jobs in the shut down period was to go through all the records and tally up how many were actually working there; the place was so big that they didn't have a clear idea. At its peak, between the Deeside and Aber works, there were 8,000 employees; when Vicky did this count, the number had gone down to 1,800. This was around 1971 and a slump had started. She was at Courtaulds for 11 years in total, in Deeside and Aber, but not in Castle where they did a different process. When the workers came out of the Castle works, their clothes smelt like burnt toast she remembers but doesn't know why, but they were making viscose and the burnt smell was probably oil.

So Vicky was at Mayfair from the age of 15 to 16, making duffle coats. Mayfair wasn't Courtaulds but was in the same factory - Deeside? - and had rented the upper floor from the company. When it closed, Courtaulds took over the entire factory and she went onto the factory floor at the Aber works with all the other workers. She was on the factory floor for a short period, working on the coning machines, before going into the work study department. On the factory floor, she found it a very different environment. Mayfair had been quite small and there were a lot more people in the new

job. **She remembers one of the bosses, Mr Cryer, coming down through the factory when she was pushing one of the yarn trolleys along, and he just pushed her into the machine out of the way, saying 'move out of the road.' Vicky couldn't do anything and she didn't think to go and complain to the union because he was the boss.**

One time, she was feeling fed up and was thinking of going on the dole, or looking for another job, and she went into the dole office to ask and they bombarded her with fifty different jobs and it was so overwhelming that she decided she'd stay where she was. She was fed up for no reason, just felt like doing something else, though she didn't know what. She did like working there and before long she was offered a job in the work study department working out the time and motion, where she'd do rates for the different yarns, e.g., if someone was on rayon, you'd watch them working and make notes on how many cones they used, how many ends broke, like a formula which they worked out, e.g. that machine on full capacity would produce fifty cones an hour. But because the girls knew her, they'd just pop out for a smoke and she'd be tying all the ends in their absence.

She doesn't know why she was chosen to do this, as she was only 20 or 21 years old at the time, and she kept this job for about five years, until 1976, when she had her first daughter. Her boss asked her to work out the production for the whole factory and she sat by him and watched how he did it; after that she was able to do it, so he gave her that job, working out the production for each of the departments in the factory in the morning, and helping out the telephonist in the Aber factory, and in the despatch office when the girl there left to have a baby. So eventually she had three office jobs at the same time and went from one to the other. She'd never had any secretarial training but was shown how to do these tasks.

Her wages then went onto the staff scale and her clock number changed to 4073 from the one she'd had as an operator, which she thinks was 2518. She was still paid cash weekly on a set wage and her £23 was a lot more than what she was getting on the factory floor, although the operatives could get a higher wage if they earned a bonus. **This was abused, however; one of the supervisors used to give her daughter who worked there the best yarns, ones which didn't snap a lot, and so she'd get a big bonus. Or, or Vicky said, if your face fitted on a Monday when she was dishing out the machines you might get a fairly good one, but if you were in her bad books or she just didn't like you, you'd get the rubbish so there was no way that week you'd make a bonus.**

58.00 This happened to Vicky several times and she says it wasn't just that this supervisor didn't like a particular worker but it could be on a whim. She wasn't unusual either among the supervisors. One Louie Dixon, who was Vicky's supervisor when she was on the Chara / Shara coning in Aber, came to her one day and said she was being sent to Deeside to work, even though she'd been in Aber for years and some other girls had only just arrived there a month or two previously. And when Vicky asked 'why me?' the answer was 'I want you to go down there.' Vicky didn't like this and she went to see somebody about it and after about three months of 'moaning' to the personnel department, she was sent back up to Aber, together with some other girls who had also been sent down there. "And I remember seeing Louie Dixon's face as I walked through the rubber doors 'I'm back!', ha, ha. She didn't send me down there again." **So maybe, Vicky thinks, she got the job in the office 'to get rid of me!'** This is when her brother showed her how to use the slide rule and she can imagine that on the factory floor, they would have bet she couldn't.

She enjoyed working in the office and has done office work ever since **She thinks they wanted to get rid of her off the factory floor and to get rid of the union rep, herself, too. She couldn't be a union rep in the work study department because the staff didn't have a union.** She doesn't know what would have happened if there had been a disagreement among the staff and says she was too busy learning new things, which she liked. She spent the first month 'in the attic,' copying stuff for different people, e.g. if a new yarn came in, the supervisors had to have the whole process,

including where it was going, all the rates for the job, the relevant labels etc, and throughout the factory they didn't have the complete files for all that was needed. So her boss asked her if she'd do this and Vicky thought it would be a half a day but it was a month long task. She'd go to the FT sheds and find out what they had and then fill the files in, and she'd repeat this until they all had what they needed.

**There was a real divide between the staff and the factory floor, she said. The operatives looked upon you as 'scabs' though the girls she'd been working with were alright with her.** She did 8am till 4pm, then and at 8 o'clock she'd go round and collect all the 'end' sheets and she'd end up there for an hour, chatting, and watching their ends while they went to the loo, so she was still 'friends' with them but they looked at her differently.

**The staff also had a different canteen and also dressed differently, quite smart instead of the overalls and little pinnies they wore on the factory floor, in which they'd put the waste yarn. The operatives bought the overalls themselves, though the company provided the little pinny and a pair of special scissors, very sharp, to cut the yarn. All the operatives then were in different coloured overalls.** The staff still had to clock in and out but it wasn't really strict.

During the shutdown, Vicky never went away for holidays. The first time she went was after she got married when she went with her husband. While she was living at home, the only holiday was the Sunday School trip to Rhyl once a year. Her mother would never have been able to afford to take all the children on holidays and she never went herself. Until she met her husband, Vicky used to work in the cafés in Rhyl "because that was like a holiday to me, seeing all those holidaymakers, serving them cups of tea, I quite liked that job." She did used to go out, to the Ritz in Rhyl by bus on a Saturday night, and her mother would let her go even though she didn't get in till late. But it was later than her mother thought, as her brother Alec used to cover for her, closing the door twice to make it seem like Vicky had come in just after him, though she was still out.

There used to be trips to Blackpool too that the factory workers arranged themselves, everyone putting some money towards it every week until they had enough to hire a bus and the whole shift would go for the day on a Saturday. They'd go on the fun fair and drinking and get back late. The factory used to organize a Christmas party for the children of married couples. In the Castle works they had a ballroom with a really good dance floor and at Christmas they'd have a proper Christmas party, at which she used to help out, with Father Christmas, and games and presents for the children.

The workers never got a Christmas bonus, just time off. There were tennis courts there, a cricket pitch, football pitch, a bowling green, allotments. Vicky says the company looked after you in that way, they provided the facilities and clubs would grow up and you'd go and watch the football and cricket matches. There was a fête just before she started there and in the 1940, big stars like Petula Clark would open it, though this had stopped by the time she was working there. At break times, in the summer, she and some staff colleagues would sit by the bowling green with their snapping tins and watch the bowls. The sports clubs sometimes competed against other factories.

There were mostly women on the factory floor though the men used to bring the yarn to their machines because it was too heavy for the women to carry. There was a lot of banter going on, a lot of teasing, but no sexual harassment that Vicky can remember. There was some pairing up and many met their husbands there, though Vicky didn't. She met her husband, Ed, in a pub that her brother used to run in Ewloe. Vicky used to help out there on a Sunday collecting glasses and he was the only one of the lads there who didn't ask her out and this made Vicky notice him. One Sunday he put a song on the jukebox that she'd asked for 'Mrs Robinson,' and then he sat next to her. She was nineteen when they met and didn't know he was only seventeen. When she asked him how old he was he said he was 21 and she believed him and never asked again. She only found out

when she met his mother. He was an apprentice engineer and they married two years later, in 1970, when she was twenty one. Eddie was only nineteen and had to get permission from his parents.

She carried on working in Courtaulds until her first child, Michelle, was born **“Of course, them times, once you were expecting a child, you couldn't go back to work, it wasn't like they could hold your job open, so I lost my job then.”**

But Vicky went on to do other things then and says leaving 'opened a door.' And she wasn't really bothered about leaving the factory because she was excited about having her first child. She didn't think about returning to factory work after the year she had off following the birth of her daughter. Then a friend who ran a newspaper shop asked her to go and work for him so she did, partly because her mother had died and her younger brother was living at home, and he wanted her and Ed to go back to the family house and look after her father. Eventually her father went to live with her sister and Vicky and her husband bought another house and their brother went to live with them until he got married.

She had a farewell do at the factory when they 'dressed her coat up' and they bought her something, which they used to do when someone got married; they bought her a china tea set which she's still got in the cabinet though she's never used it. When she was expecting, the staff in the office did a collection for her, though she got nothing from the bosses, except a reference. Her memories of the factory are happy ones, especially the camaraderie, because everybody was the same, women who had had children who were now grown up and who had come back out to work to help the budget, and younger women who had just started, everyone was on a level playing field. The only thing she didn't like was getting up at 5am when she was on the shift system.

Vicky ended her interview with a story of how her husband's mother, before he was married, used to warm his socks for him to put on in the morning. When he asked Vicky, soon after they were married 'Where's my socks?' she replied 'Where did you put them?' and thought 'It's freedom time, ha, ha.'

Duration: 1 hr 20 minutes