

LLEISIAU O LAWR Y FFATRI / VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR

Courtaulds (1967-71)

Interviewee: VN029 Gaynor Hughes

Date: 08: 07: 2014

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

Gaynor confirmed her name, address and date of birth as 17/04/1950

Her mother worked in a hospital, in charge of the canteen, and her father in the Shotton Steelworks. She had a brother who worked in Courtaulds and the other brother in the steelworks at Shotton. Both her daughters are grown up. Gaynor lives in the house she was born in. She went to school just down the road and then to secondary school in Holywell. She left at 15 and worked in a paper mill for a year, but everyone wanted to work in Courtaulds as the money was good so Gaynor applied and got a job there. She was 17 when she started in the factory. In the paper mill, she can't remember what she did but remembers there were big machines. It was very hard to get in Courtaulds but she got in the first time she tried.

The job in the paper mill wasn't hard and it was a day job. She can't remember how much she was paid but says the money in Courtaulds was 'fantastic' and that every weekend she used to go to Liverpool and buy clothes. On a Friday night, the girls used to go to work with rollers in their hair and ask for a pass-out, i.e. permission to leave early at 6.30 or 7.00. If you'd done your work all week, they usually gave you a pass out and Gaynor and her friends used to go to the Raven pub in Flint.

She did have an interview but she can't remember it and neither can she remember her first day, though the factory was much bigger than the paper mill. There were three factories - Deeside, Castle and Aber; Aber was the nicest one and she was in that one. She can't remember her wages but her first job was 'coning' - you had reels and you had to keep your 'ends up', she said, as an inspector would be coming round to see your cones were all going. There was a big cone with cotton or wool on them and it went round so it was moving all the time and if an end broke you had to tie it quick so it would keep going and you'd get your bonus

Gaynor hadn't done that sort of work before so she had a couple of days training when she started. She picked it up very quickly and loved it there, because it was something she'd achieved, keeping her ends up and the cones going. They had a machine each and she worked in a team with two others - Lil and Vanessa, who were older than she was and had started before her. Gaynor started

on 'normal' coning machines and because she was fast they put her on the wool.

She was working shifts, six till two and two till ten, which alternated each week. She said the shift system was alright especially since on the afternoon shift, they could ask for a pass out and leave early. She stood up the whole time at the cones but didn't mind as she was young. She wore an overall which she had to buy herself; as all the girls bought their own overalls, they were all sorts of colours, some were tabards and others full overalls. In the photo, VN029.5 she is wearing scholls on her feet. She doesn't remember much health and safety there. Underneath their overalls, the girls wore whatever they liked, dresses or skirts and tops, but not high heels, usually 'flats.'

When a worker went on a break, someone else would take over their machine to keep it going. She had the usual breaks morning and afternoon. She worked with the same two girls and they would all go for a break at the same time and three other girls would take over their machines.

9.00 There wasn't much of a canteen there just 'an old shed' which was a smallish room and was in the same building. Everyone was on one level. They took their own food and there was a kettle to have a cup of tea or coffee, though they had to take their own coffee and tea. They had to clock in and out and the company was strict on time-keeping. Gaynor lived 3-4 miles away and got the bus in to the factory, she thinks it was 'Phillips Bus Service.' The bus fare was free because the company laid it on and it took the workers home even if they were on the late shift. There wasn't a night shift that she can remember.

It was noisy in the factory but there was no ear protection. She can't remember any accidents while she was there, at least where she was. In the Aber factory, there were over a hundred workers (?) though it was the smallest of the three. The Castle works was under the bridge in Flint and the Deeside factory was where Macdonalds is now in Flint. The Aber factory was 'way up the top' but still in Flint.

There were men working there too who would bring the cones to the machines for the girls and to do the packing. The cones went from the machines to the packing room to be sent away to be made into clothes and to wool shops, to be sold in knitting cones, which she thinks cost £5 a cone. She didn't knit at the time but she did begin later on when she had children.

On the machines, there were only girls. They all used to 'have a laugh' because once the line was going, you could have a chat. The managers were alright as long as you did your work, she says. If she wanted to go to the toilet, she had to ask because somebody had to come and take over for her.

If she was on the morning shift, she would start at 6am. The bus went about 5.30. After clocking in, the buzzer went and they went straight to the machines. They had three breaks during the day including lunch. The day went quite quickly even though the work was monotonous but 'you were on the go all day, and you thought about the money, didn't you.' At that time, you wanted to keep your job cos it was good money there. Gaynor used to give money to her mother for housekeeping as she was still living at home. She took twenty pound off Gaynor and Gaynor thinks she must have been on £100 a week with bonuses 'and then I used to moan about that, ha, ha.'

She made a bonus every week, which was £7 on top of your wages; she got a bonus for getting the work out quicker. She wanted the big bonus 'cos £7 then was a lot.' She didn't make the top bonus of £7 every week, it varied.

Apart from buying clothes, Gaynor used to out to the Raven in Flint, with the young girls from the factory. They used to go every Saturday and if there was something on on a Friday and they could get a pass-out, they'd go then too. Some of her friends, like Alice Barry, worked in the Deeside

factory and couldn't get a pass-out. If they were going out on a Friday and got a pass-out, they didn't go straight out but used to go home to get changed. She used to wear make-up to work, not a lot, just mascara, but some of the girls went with rollers in their hair and head scarves. These used to be the older workers, she thinks. The younger workers like herself and 'Miss Mostyn' (wearing a mini-skirt in VN029.10) had longer 'sixties' hairstyles. Gaynor also had a nick-name in the factory, given her by a co-worker, Kevin - 'Ellie May' from the 'Clampit' family, a TV show, because she used to put her hair in bunches.

20.50 The company was good to work for, she says. She can't remember whether there was sick pay if a worker was off. She can't remember what happened at Christmas or during the holidays. There was a trade union but she doesn't think she was a member. She doesn't remember if there was any disputes while she was there but there might have been in one of the other two factories. She can't remember if anyone ever complained. There was an amount of bickering there, like everywhere 'you always get bickering in factories' but she says the girls she was working with were alright.

She was in Courtaulds for four years and she did the same job throughout. Her wages must have gone up, she thinks, but can't remember how much. After leaving the factory she went to work in a shoe shop in Holywell, Gwyn Davies, because it was days and she was fed up of doing shifts. She knew the owners well and when he opened a club she went to work there too, so she worked in the shop and in the club.

She was 16/17 when she went to Courtaulds and was about 19/20 when she left. She did go back into factories after she had her first daughter, Carmen, into a factory called Colvertec, which made colostomy bags on Deeside. It has a different name now. She was there for a couple of years and her daughter, who was in her teens, also had a job there.

Gaynor got married at age 20/21, not long after she left Courtaulds. She had some jobs before going to Colvertec but was at home for a little while. She returned to factory work because it was good money, £200 a week, without bonus. She was making colostomy bags on a machine and says there were 'fast lines' there but you swapped over every two hours and went into a different machine to make a different product to prevent monotony. Only girls worked the machines and the men did the heavy work. The facilities were very good in this factory she said.

When she went into Colvertec she thinks Courtaulds had already closed. She enjoyed factory work but couldn't have stayed in the same place for ever, she had to have a change. She did ten years of care work, based in a house with an elderly couple, and when they died she decided she couldn't do care work again as she'd become too close to them. So she returned to factory work for a third time, making steel ties in Greenfield, in a factory called Ancon. She was there for three years and was aged about 48 or 50.

It was hard to compare the three factories, she said, because they were all so far apart in years. Regarding Courtaulds, Gaynor can't remember a lot about it. When she left school she says it was expected that she go to work, she was old enough and her mother expected 'keep' from her. She became more confident, she says, and that the older workers used to look after and help the younger girls. There were 'loads' of married women there, even from Mold and places like that. After having children, women would go back, like her friend in photo VN029.12, but she doesn't know if the company provided maternity pay or any other benefits. She can't remember anything unpleasant happening there 'because I enjoyed it there.'

In photo VN029.5, Gaynor is posing for an official Courtaulds photograph (c. Courtaulds Photographic Department). She thinks this was taken during a visit by a German company but she

doesn't know exactly why, whether they had shares in the company, and she doesn't know why they wanted this photograph. But Courtaulds had a magazine and the photo was printed in it and it went 'abroad.' 'They asked me if I would do it and I said yes.' She was nervous, however, she says.

David Lumley, in the office, who took VN029.4, was into photography and he asked her if he could photograph her, 'And I said yes cos I was only a young girl.'

She sees some of her ex-Courtaulds workers around from time to time, like Jackie Bibby and Alice Barry, who is her best friend anyway, who worked in the Deeside mill, and Elin Jones from Mold, but she supposes a lot of people have died now.

Duration: 30 minutes