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Ruabon Brick Works (1970-74)

Interviewee: **VN035 Peter Davies**

Date: **15: 08: 2014**

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

Peter confirmed his name, address and date of birth, namely 13/04/1955.

Peter's mother, Nesta Davies (VN025), and his sisters, Anita Roberts (VN036) and Julie Allen were also present.

Peter left school at 15 and got a job in the 'donkey works' ie the brick yard in Ruabon. He worked there for a couple of years, before leaving to work on a farm for a while, then he returned to the brick works for another couple of years until he was about 18 and then he went into the building trade. **His wages went up from £8 a week to £1 an hour so he stayed in the building trade.**

He says he wasn't very good at school because he is dyslexic, though they didn't know what that was in those days. He was just left at the bottom of the class to get on with it. He 'bluffed' his way through school, didn't like it and didn't go very often if he could help it. So he left school early "they didn't even noticed I'd gone" and got a job before he left in the brickyard by going down and asking for one. He told them he'd already left school so they took him on, though he still had a few weeks to go. He went back to school for the last day "just to show my face." His parents didn't know half the things he got up to, he said, and at the brickyard they'd employ anybody. There was a joke sign on the gate 'trespassers will be employed.' So you could get a job there if you couldn't get one anywhere else and that is why he went there. The family were living close to the brickyard at the time, in Ruabon, though there were several within a radius of a few miles. The area was famous for it good quality red brick tiles in the period and Peter worked in all of them at one time or other. In one of them, Trefor, he was employed in shovelling clay into drams to go up to be crushed.

He thinks his parents were quite proud of him that he had the initiative to go and get a job. He'd been working through his summer holidays when in school, on farms, for the money and also he liked work better than school.

The brick factory was hard, dirty work. There were no showers and no canteen. It was also very dangerous, and a few of the young men there were killed when one of the kilns blew up. Someone

else, a friend of his, was killed when a forklift ran into his back and another was crushed to death by a dumper. **The health and safety wasn't very good. The drivers had to drive down long dark passages that weren't very well lit, or a truck would come out in front of a worker, it was like the 'wacky races' said Peter. He said he was driving an electric truck, and there were also diesel trucks all using the same narrow tracks. Everybody knew what they were doing, however, and they could pass within millimetres of each other and the faster they went the better. "But we were young, you know, and it was like a game at first. But it was very dangerous."**

He doesn't know if there was compensation for these accidents but thinks there must have been, but it depended on whose fault it was, although it was obviously the company's fault as regards the safety regulations. **"But in them days, there wasn't anything like that, it was different than it is now. There'd be an enquiry now." He said he nearly got killed trapped under a wagon once, when somebody was coming towards him and he put his dumper into reverse and backed into a wagon, going underneath it. There were no safety guards on the vehicles so he was trapped underneath the trailer and pushed down onto the steering while of his dumper. He was lucky enough to get his foot onto the clutch and put it back into gear and get the vehicle out. He was bruised but not badly hurt and says he was very lucky because another man, who did the same after he'd left, was killed.**

8.30 Peter started work there in 1970 and he began working on the steam mill where they brought in the raw material from the quarry on small railway tracks, then into a crusher, then it was mixed with water and oil in the steam mill and it would come out as blocks of clay which would then be stacked onto a truck. He used to drive this truck and take the blocks down to the drying room where two men would unload them and put them in the drying room where the floor was hot and where they would be dried. After a week there, someone else would come along in dumper, pick up the now-dry blocks and take them to another part of the factory to be turned into tiles, by going through another machine.
The girls would be on the presses, where the tiles would come out onto oil covered steel tables so that they'd slide around, and the girls would stack them onto trolleys and then the men would wheel them out to the kilns where they'd be dried again for a few days. Then some more men would take them out and take them to the packing sheds, where women would pack them to be sent off to builders.

The factory started off as Ruabon Red Bricks, a hundred years previous, but the call for those sort of bricks died out and they started making Everbrown tiles, which also became world famous as floor tiles. Dennis's was the name of the company, although it wasn't the only one making the bricks and tiles, though Peter thinks they were all owned by the same company, and it employed several hundred people in its heyday.

Both men and women worked there; the men would do the kiln work, drying the tiles, making the tiles, and the women would be mostly packing the tiles, although there were one or two women driving the fork lift trucks. "**It wasn't an easy job that the women were packing the tiles, they were probably better at it. Yeah, some of the girls used to work with us as well, like"** The number of men and women were more or less equal, said Peter, and most of them had been at school together 'like a big community' although there were some men who'd been there years.

"Then there'd be all the young people who'd left school and couldn't get jobs anywhere else, they'd all end up in the brickyard because you could get a job in the brickyard. It wasn't a nice job but we used to have a laugh there, you know."

Peter said the atmosphere was 'brilliant' and they were all friends. At the end of the week, they'd all

go out together for a drink at the local pub, the girls and the lads. **"But the pub we were in, everyone knew we were there because, even though we were dressed in our best clothes, and we'd had a shower and put our perfume on and everything, after shave, and the girls the same, when we walked in that pub, you could smell us, the brickyard smell was on us and it'd be coming out of your pores."** The smell was like an oil mixed with clay smell, very potent, but they couldn't smell it on themselves but others could who didn't work there, even if they were out for a night out.

14.50 T**hey used to have a lot of fun, said Peter, and he said the women were "terrible with the men, we were scared stiff of them, ha, ha, the women were worse than the men, a lot worse." He said there was always a lot of banter between them and the girls, "If you had a chance, you'd go up into the press room where the girls were working and have a chat with them, you know. Or you'd sneak up there to have a chat with them. I met my girlfriend there. My first wife worked there when she was fifteen, sixteen, and her mates worked there. My first wife was very intelligent, she was a very clever girl, but she didn't try very hard 'cos she wanted to go to work in the brickyard 'cos her other mates were working there. You know they all wanted to work together. So there was a big gang of us from schooldays, all going out together, courting each other."**

The workforce was a real mixture, of ages; there was an old Polish man who'd been there since the war, and people were in their 70s down to 15. Everyone did the same hours, 8am till 4.30pm, and there was no shift system. They had a lunch break, either in the 'bit of a shed that we all used to sit in' or people would find their own place to go. They had half an hour for dinner, and perhaps ten minutes in the morning and half an hour in the afternoon, and then work through until the hooter went. The workers took their own tea or coffee in and the company didn't supply anything **"You took your own snapping, and you'd have to watch your snappin box or somebody'd nail it to the table or something like that as a joke, or put something in it that shouldn't be in it."**

Peter said it was hard work but they used to enjoy it, there was a few 'cushy jobs' there but most of the work was hard. If you were running the mill, he said, you weren't physically working hard, just mixing the clay with water. He started off driving an electric truck, which had big batteries under the seat, and these trucks used to be on charge overnight and they'd pull a little truck which carried the raw material. He began by learning how to drive these, backing up into bays and so on. Then they moved him on to another part of the job so that he could learn another skill. **The workers learned how to do everything so that if somebody was off, they could fill in and do their job.** So not every day was the same, he could be on the electric mill one day and the steam mill the next, and Peter said he enjoyed this as it broke the monotony of doing the same thing every day. He picked up these jobs pretty well.

19.19 Some jobs were paid better than other jobs, some of the men would be on piece work, and they could earn more. Peter was on piece work at the end, but says by the time he'd learned everything, and after a disagreement with a co-worker, he left. He says there were fights or disagreements there quite often, but mostly over personal matters, nothing to do with the work. He got into a couple of physical fights there and had his nose broken twice. **But fighting was a sacking office and both he and the other man were sacked for fighting over one of the girls in the presses, though the firm took them both back a year later. This man had pulled out in front of him in his forklift and that gave them the opportunity to clash over this girl.** The man got in the first blow and Peter had to go to hospital to get his nose fixed, where he stayed for a couple of weeks. When he went back, he had to go to the office, and they sacked him and the other man.

When he returned a year later, he stayed for about another year, before he finished for good and

went into the building trade. **He wasn't bothered about being sacked, he says, as he went straight into another job. "It was quite easy to get work then" and even though he'd been sacked he said that "they didn't even ask you, as long as you could do the job, you were alright.**" His next job was in British Tissues, a factory that made boxes of tissues, and he worked on the production line there for a while, and he says this was 'clean' work, feeding the tissue through a machine which cut it up to go into boxes. He quite liked the job and got know it quite well, and the fitters asked him to take a job with them, as he used to fix the machines instead of calling them to do it. He would have liked to have done this but he would have had to go to 'tech' once a week so he told them he liked working on the line; because he was dyslexic he was too scared to go to college, **"You couldn't read and write and you felt a fool so you used to hide it from everybody."** So he didn't want to be a fitter then.

He was about a year in the tissue factory and then he broke his leg on his motorbike and had to finish, so he was off work for a while. He can't remember why he didn't go back to the tissue factory but went into a steel making factory for a few months, then was a porter for a few years in a hospital. He went back to the brick yard the second time for a while and then went into the building trade.

He thinks his first wage at the brickyard was about £5 a week, for a 40 hour week. Demolition work was £1 an hour, so it was triple the money. In the brick yard, there was no protective clothing, the workers used to buy their own. The guards on the machines weren't up to standard and a few of the lads got hurt, lost fingers. There was a foreman watching over the workers and he was approachable this man, John Cole, and would help with any problems the workers might have. If there was an accident, there was a first aid room with a first aid man there who would patch you up and send you to hospital. Peter went there when he broke his nose but he doesn't think accidents were recorded. There was a trade union there, he thinks but is not sure. He wasn't a member.

In British Tissues, on an industrial estate in Wrexham, the health and safety issue was completely different, and it was a lot safer and cleaner. His work was also completely different, you were trained on one job and you stayed on it. **In the brickyards, especially the one in Trefor, it was like going back in time, he said, like when you had to fill the drams going with the raw material, and there was only one man doing it and if he fell behind the whole factory stopped. Peter himself, when on this job, suggested they get a machine to do this, but they just said 'Oh, we'll get you one' but they never did. So in the end he walked out and went to the pub. They came looking for him in the afternoon, in the pub, and asked him to go back as he was doing good job and nobody else wanted to do it.**

Work was easier to get in those days as there were more factories about than today, even though the pay wasn't that good. Peter said you'd have to have an interview to start and they'd usually tell you there and then, not say 'we'll let you know.'

After the brickworks, following some short-lived jobs, Peter worked in the building trade for the following thirty years, mainly for the money. Now he is self employed doing roofing, plastering, painting "I'm all self taught."

Talking about the tissue factory, he says it was a good factory, very clean, with both male and female workers. It had a bit of a canteen, which was a bit of a surprise when he went there, 'oh, a canteen,' and it had showers and different things there if you wanted to use them, and it did supply gloves and overalls.' There was a trade union there and he was a member. "**Somebody came to you and said 'are you joining' you know, you had to, and then they'd take it out of your wages every week." There was no choice, he said, either you joined the union or you didn't work**

there. "It was like that in them days . . . if there was no chips in the canteen at Firestones, the workers went on strike."

Duration: 35 minutes