

LLEISIAU O LAWR Y FFATRI / VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR

Hotpoint, Llandudno (1978-2003)

Interviewee: VN038 Keith Evans

Date: 21: 08: 2014

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

Keith confirmed his name, address and date of birth, 26th June 1938.

He was born in Llandudno and has lived there all his life. His father went from job to job and his mother stayed at home and "obviously didn't work." He was one of nine children and two siblings, twins, died when they were young. He went to the Central school and left when he was 14 or 15. He wanted to leave 'to be honest' and it wasn't that he didn't like it but his Aunt Mary had put him into a Welsh class and he didn't know any Welsh. He was moved into an English class but now regrets not speaking Welsh.

After school, he delivered bread for a bakery on a three-wheeler bike, and after that he worked as a window cleaner but didn't like that. Then he went to work for a builder and with this man, who was very good, he started a pension scheme. He went into the army in 1957, being called up as National Service, and then when it was over he signed on for another 12 months, going to Malta and Berlin, and Cyprus. After the army, he worked for a roofing contractor for over twenty years before going to Hotpoint. The firm paid very well but he felt he wasn't getting the bonuses he was due, as he was not being given government contracts that paid better than private construction.

He saw that jobs were going in Hotpoint and he applied, being interviewed by Kathy Smith (VN023). **She asked him, as he'd always worked outside, if he could stick working inside and he replied that he would because he had four children at home that needed feeding.** Keith was about 40 at this time. It was a bit strange working indoors, he said. In the building trade, he'd move from job to job and he'd know other builders but when he went into the factory he didn't know anyone. Some of the workers at Hotpoint did speak Welsh and there was one lad working there who refused to put the union jack sticker on the machines, saying - "I'm Welsh and I'm not doing it" - he was eventually moved to another line.

Keith's first job in the factory was on the 1828 machine, putting the instruction stickers on the front - switch on, switch off etc. Like Margaret, his wife (VN037) he had a week in the training school, where they tested if he could use two hands as they wanted workers who were not just one handed. He wasn't long on the first job, about a month, as it was a breaking in sort of job, something easy to start off with, as you couldn't put a new worker on complicated job.

Keith moved to various jobs during his time there - the Combo dryer was one of the longest. You could go in of a morning, he said, and they might send him into the press shop; he hadn't been trained on that work and it was quite dangerous as it was very sharp material. They'd show him once what to do and then leave him to get on with it. He found this very strange and thinks that the health and safety regulations were very lax. It was quite a hard place to work and the noise was deafening. The press shop made all sorts of parts for the machinery. On the shop floor, if he was put on to a different line, the reject man would come and stand with him for 15 minutes or so and show him thoroughly what he had to do but in the press shop, where you really needed the training, there'd be far less of it.

He became quite experienced and ended up building motors, staying on those when they changed the system and went on to a different motor, and he was there until he had his heart attack in 1997. He was off for a year following this and the company paid him sick pay while he was off because he had a good record. They had premium days - if a worker went 12 months without having any time off, you'd get five extra days holiday the following year, so the company looked at the premium days he'd earned and they paid him during his recovery period and kept his job open for him. The foreman, Meirion, asked him on his return if he felt up to going back onto the motors and he did, as it was the thing he knew best, even though there was a target of 300 motors to build every day if that was what the line needed. Meirion told him not to worry about the target and break himself in gently. Workers did pace themselves and often did a little over the target one day, say four extra, so they'd have that four to start with the next day.

13.50 Keith worked with both men and women, though mostly alongside men on the line, as there were not many women doing the same thing he was doing, but another part for the same machine, like Margaret on the wires. He thinks there were more men than women in the factory. His wages when he started were £76 a week and the wages, under Shreiber, went up every year; when new managers came in, this didn't happen and things began to change. **He didn't earn more than his wife. Hotpoint policy was that if people were doing the same work they got the same money. He didn't see such much of Margaret in the factory as they were usually at different ends of the building, although they travelled to and from work together on the bus or in the car.**

Leaving at the end of the day could be quite dangerous as everyone ran for their cars in the car park across the road and were in danger of being knocked over, they were that keen to get out. "Like a madhouse" he says it was, and if a worker crossed the line by the doors before the bell went and a foreman was there "he'd have you." One of the foremen used to hang back deliberately to see if anybody would cross the line, hoping to catch some of the lads who were desperate to get out.

17.40 In the morning, workers had to be on the line at 7.30 sharp because if they weren't, the machines would be going down with parts missing and they'd end up on the reject line. The workers didn't clock in, they were just on the line by the time the foreman pressed the button at 7.30 to start the line moving. Apart from lunch and tea and toilet breaks, the workers would be on the line until it was switched off at the end of the day, producing machine after machine. If line workers went to lunch, that whole line would stop for the half hour, while the others would keep going, so they all stopped in turn, and after so many weeks, the order in which they stopped changed round. A foreman physically pressed a button to stop the line. At the end of each line was a red emergency button but you'd get in trouble if you didn't have a good reason for stopping it. A line was a series of rollers set close together with a treadmill at the end of it and the machines would come down to the workers who put on a different part as it went by.

In the Junction, the line was quite slow and even elderly workers could do it. In Kinmel, time and motion became really strict and some people couldn't keep up when these lines went faster. If this was the case, they'd be moved elsewhere. Equally if a person wasn't at his or her station when the machine went past, that would go down as a 'part missing.' That machine would then go onto the reject line, where it would be fixed, and then sent through. Sometimes a machine would fail its working test and that would be a reject.

Keith and Margaret bought a Hotpoint machine from the factory for their daughter, at cost price, which has just stopped working now, 2014, after twenty years. The factory did a trial of certain makes and the workers could buy one cheaply, and they bought this one for £120, and the factory checked every so often how it was working. The company would have a garage sale too, where maybe a machine would have some cosmetic damage and there would be a 'scramble' for those among the workers.

There was a lot of leg pulling going on between the workers, the men and the women, according to Margaret. But Keith recalled a time when there was some overtime going he had a run in with one of the female workers over it. The next day he was called into the office, and the foreman said he'd better get his union rep to go with him. Keith didn't know what was going on but he was told that he'd called this woman a 'slag' and Keith said 'I don't think so, I've got four daughters and I wouldn't even think of anybody addressing my daughter . . . ' What he'd said was 'she's very sly' because she'd done the overtime behind his back when she'd said she wasn't going to do it. So John, the man he was working with couldn't do the overtime either, as she helped them, even though he wanted to do it. But she'd come back in and done it, and so Keith had called her sly and she, or some other women working down the line, had made out he'd called her a slag. The case was dismissed anyway and Margaret was Keith's rep in this matter even though they were man and wife. Margaret was 'independent' she says but nevertheless told them that her husband would never call anyone a slag and he had more respect for women than that.

They had annual holidays every year, the factory fortnight, last week in July and first week in August, when the factory shut down. One of the problems of building up premium days was not being able to use them when they wanted to, as someone else might be off so they couldn't have the same holidays. Workers could phone in sick or take a premium day but it had to be before 7am. After three days sick, they had to have a doctor's note. A lot of workers had it all worked out, said Margaret.

Re holidays, they used to travel around quite a lot in the summer - Scarborough or Blackpool with the kids, for a week as that was all they could afford, and the second week would be at home or perhaps a day here and there. They had the usual bank holidays off. At Christmas the company would give them Christmas dinner though not everybody went, it was free and the food was quite nice. Margaret always went and Keith sometimes. They didn't usually go to the canteen together as a rule as they were on different dinner breaks depending on where they were working. At the Christmas dinner, they also had a band singing carols. He thinks the company gave them a bonus one year, not money but a big cake. The only bonus they had was the profit share.

When Shreiber ran the factory, the workers were also able to buy furniture and pay for it out of their wages. Shreiber did more for the workforce than any of the others, says Keith.

Like Margaret, Keith didn't want to go to Kinmel works either as he says in Llandudno Junction they were a 'different bunch.'

Keith did nearly 25 years at Hotpoint and they asked him if he wanted redundancy when he only

had three months left to go. They gave him a quote but adjusted it because he was coming up to 65, so it wasn't such an attractive package, as he was in his redundancy year. It was worth his while going anyway so he finished three months before his retirement age. He was ready to go by then he says. He'd wanted to return to work after his heart attack, and he did after a year, but with hindsight he could have gone on long term sick and would have been financially well off and get a lump sum, but he didn't know that at the time.

He says factory work was easier than roofing even though he was making more money, but it wasn't as secure as Hotpoint.

Duration : 35 minutes