

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI

LEWIS & TYLOR, GRIPOLY MILLS, SLOPER ROAD, CARDIFF

Interviewee: VSE051 Mrs Jill Williams

Date: 24th April 2014

Interviewer: Mandi O'Neill on behalf of the Women's Archive of Wales / Archif
Menywod Cymru

So, Jill, can you tell me name, date of birth, where you were born and a bit about your family?

Right, my name is Jillian Elizabeth King but my married name now is Williams and I was born on the 21st April 1952 at six o'clock in the evening when the laundry – Crystal Laundries – hooter went off for people to finish work. It went off at six o'clock and that was at exactly the time I was born. And I was born across the road from there in number seven Redlaver Street and I've lived actually in that street all my life except for one year when I got married and I moved up to Pentyrch where my husband was from. We were lucky enough then to have a son but he died at the age of two months and I just wanted to come back home. So we went to live with my mother in number seven and we stayed with my mother for about six months. My husband then had a very bad accident – breaking his two legs falling off a roof – from revlon(?) roof – so we decided then that it was time that we had to try and get a property of our own; so a property came up and we went for it and that's where we've lived the whole of our married life. My three children was brought up there and just, nice, lovely.

Perfect. That's great. So, when did you – what school did you go to?

I went to the old Grangetown National School which is now called St Paul's and then I was one of the first pupils to attend Bishop of Llandaff High School when it first opened. There was only actually two from Grangetown in the class that I went to in Bishop of Llandaff that went to the actual school, everybody else went to different schools but we, we actually went to Bishop of Llandaff. I enjoyed it there, it was lovely, nice friends, nice teachers, and then when I left then...

And what age were you when you left?

I was just coming up to 16 when I left and at the time then my mother said if you're leaving school you're out to work. So my aunty actually then took me for an interview in the Gripoly Mills.

02:56

And did she work there?

Nope – she'd heard that there was a – my aunty actually worked for Bruton's, the cake shop. She heard there was a vacancy going there so I went in there and ohhh my god, the noise, the noise was unbelievable. I've always suffered with my ears – I've actually got two hearing aids – I'm only wearing one at the moment – but I've always suffered with my ears and when I walked in there I thought gosh, it's loud, I'd never heard anything so loud because they had power looms, which are electric looms, and they also had manual looms. And I'm looking around and I'm thinking, oh my god, I could never do this. But as soon as the foreman said yes, there's a vacancy, I can start tomorrow, I nearly died. No, no, no, I can't do it. I went home and I cried to my mother, mum, I can't do it, she said, try it for a week. I tried it for a week and I ended up there – oh – over 10 years. I loved it. I even – when I was pregnant – for my second son, they even gave me a loom, a small loom, that I could take home.

Oh, so you did home work?

I did home work. I did a lot of repairing of belts. We were on actual piecework, the more money you made was by the amounts of belts you produced. But unfortunately a couple of people didn't think, oh well, there's no quality in here, I could get quantity. So then it was brought to me to repair them. To put them so they didn't have to waste the whole thing.

They were a lovely company. Even the forewoman, she was so... she was only a little woman but she was so kind and we used to see the manager – Neil Lawson I think his name was – I remember the name Lawson – I got it, yeah, Neil Lawson – he'd come in, how are you doing girls, everything all right, any complaints? No, everybody got on – if something was wrong, it would get sorted.

05:20

And so, do you remember your first day there?

I had my first day there, oh my god, it was terrible. I couldn't, I thought I can't do this, I can't do this and it was actually Mr Holt, who was the foreman, it was his daughter – they'd come over from Bradford to show us a different way of weaving on different types of looms. And his daughter showed me how to do things and it was with wires. If you look at a clip, a hair clip, how a hair clip, this is the only way I can describe it, you put like a hair clip through a piece of cotton and it was the wiggly bits on the hair clip, in there was a hole and each strand of this cotton had to go into the centre of that hole. There was two prongs on the top of this wire that had to go on a bar and that was done on every one of those strands that you had to put on a frame. It could go from 28 strands to over five, six hundred strands.

So it was quite skilled work then?

It was, yeah, and when you did all that you had all these wires on all these strands, you had four poles in front of you, you had to put them – if you were doing what we call – two shafts – you'd have to put it on; start on number three, there was four poles in front, not poles, I'd say, like big long skewers then, that's the only way I can describe it. They were attached to the end of a loom. You'd put the wire on and you'd start off on number three, put that wire onto number three. So when you put it on the end of the cotton would be pulled up. So then you go to the next one and you put that on number one, third one on number three, next one on number two, next one on number four so you had to remember which wire you had to put it on. So you were actually giving a feeling of – your feet going up and down sort of thing. When they were all put onto a wire you had another thing like a skewer took along the bottom holes, at the bottom underneath the warp – what we called the warp – and you would put every one of those so they're lined up. So when you're finished you've actually got four lots of wires attached from bottom with the cotton going through the middle. Then this is the fun bit – you unclip the skewer-type things off the top of the loom, you hold them in your hand – one hand – and you pull off all these cotton strands, hold them

in your hand and you'd walk round to the front of the loom and you would attach them to a shaft thing on the loom. There was four frames and each one of these poles would fit top and bottom. Then you would pull the front bit to a roller and attach the cotton ends to that and then you'd go to the back of the loom and attach it to the roller that was on the back.

09:09 Then you would pick up a – it was a piece of wood with a bit of foam stuck on it – that was your seat – you'd stick that on the back of the loom, climb up on it and you got four pedals and if you did the warp right you'd press on two pedals and it would open, fine. And it'd be opening like this each time you pressed on those but if you got one of those wires wrong you wouldn't be able to open it. So you'd have to look through the wires to see where you'd gone wrong. And with a pair of scissors you would either cut the wire and take the whole wire out, then weave a little bit but you'd have two pieces of cotton – like as though you'd dropped a stitch in knitting – it would look different. So what you would do then you would pull the one out that shouldn't have been there and cut that as well but you wouldn't sew it, you would wait, and then when you've woven all that belt around you'd sit there and you'd take the wires – you were supposed to have taken the whole thing off the machine and put it in another hand-held thing so you can hold it in your hand and twist the wires out one at a time. It's a pity it's not on camera because I'm showing you how to do it and you're thinking how to do...

Complicated!

It was complicated – but when you got used to doing it so much you could do it with your eyes closed. I could anyhow, because I'd be there asleep.

But then how long did the training take to learn...

It didn't take – I got to be honest – it didn't take me too long because – I found it very interesting. I'd say, within a couple of weeks, you were there and you could do it. As long as you concentrated on what you were doing – the only hard thing that I found, it was terrible on your hands. The calluses I had on my hands – well, everybody, it was unbelievable, because you had to use what they called a beater which was a wooden thing that had been – the foreman made them – two handles and you'd have a piece that was cut like V shape so you could wrap the cotton around which you were using to weave. And the other bit was oval, so you can pull it towards you. Each time you opened those shafts, you'd beat it and it would come through, beat it, come through, beat it. And by the end of the day, the first day of weaving, I'm looking at my hands, my two little fingers, where you were actually catching the weft – that's what they called it, the weaving between – you were catching the weft with your little fingers so you didn't go too far because you had to – in between all that – you had to the size that belt had to be. It could be anything from a half inch wide to maybe nine inches wide. You could have it three and a half inches, you could have it two and a half inches, you could have it two and three quarters – each belt had to be made perfect – you couldn't go under that size and you couldn't go over a size. If you got carried away and carried on weaving and you measured it and it was too narrow you had to go back and take it out. So at the end, you gauged yourself how wide or narrow it was supposed to be. And it was exactly the same. Then when you come to the end you literally had to stand – I mean I wasn't very heavy when I started working – I was six stone four. I was, my nickname was Colskin(?) – I was six stone four and trying to open up those shafts when there was only about a half an inch wide and you got four lots of wires and things in there. You could leave a bigger gap but it meant it was a much harder time sewing it in. So I always tried to get a small gap so you only had to sew in three or four rows stitching by hand and at the end then you couldn't see where it was joined or anything, it was a completely round belt. But we made them in cotton, we made them in nylon.

13:58

So nylon would have been quite tough on your fingers?

Yeah, I've actually brought some things – when we left we used to pick up little bits like this because they're handy for gardening or anything. Fibreglass, now that was hard as well because if you get a sliver of fibre in your hands it would snap off...

So you wouldn't have gloves when you did the fibreglass?

No, no, you wouldn't have gloves, no, never, never wore gloves. The worse one that I've ever done, we were told it was horsehair but it ended up, it was camel hair and it stunk to high heaven. It was terrible and they were really, really long. I'd say the looms was about as long as this table

What do you think...

The length of the loom – you could do a belt that length...

What's that, about five foot you think? Bit longer, six foot?

I'd say it was probably – say six foot, just over six foot but you did longer length belts with that because you would have little wheels with poles in and all along the loom there was holes where you could put the end of your cotton and move it to there and you'd have another roll so your belt was actually a snake and then when you weave the little bit that's in front of you, you put your feel on the thing in front of you and you pull with all your might to move to the next bit.

All your six stone four?

Rowing, yeah, it's a bit like rowing. You know how a rower goes and you weave that little bit and pull it back again and it – I loved it – and alright I admit it when I first went in there I thought I'd never stick but I did, I thoroughly loved every minute of it.

So what year did you start there then?

1968 – yeah 1968, and I got married in '73 and that was funny that was, because at the time I got married there was four weddings and the foreman was saying, I'm fed up of you lot having time off – jokingly – right got another collection now, let's get down Rivelines now and see what we can buy. There used to be a place in Penarth Road I D & S Rivelines, it was a warehouse and it sold everything. And I think most of the girls that was there started of their homes with stuff that was bought from there. I've actually, believe it or not, I've been married 42 years and I'm still using the whisk, the electric whisk, that was bought for me for a wedding present. Touch wood, it's still going. But – there was nothing that was too much trouble, nothing at all was too much trouble for anybody and if anybody ever had anything that was wrong with them, there'd always be a basket of fruit or a card or something or somebody would go round the house to make sure they were okay.

17:25

So was it a family firm, a family run firm?

I don't think it was, everybody was just, everybody was so friendly. But as I said if – Mr Lawson started I think it was in the thirties, started having these – they called them plastic belts but they were rubberized belts and it was so funny because when you went in there and saw the people on the other side making these plastic belts, they were smaller looms but they had a little bucket and a little mop and they had to wet the rubber so it was flexible for them to weave so they had like rubberized plastic aprons so they wouldn't get wet. And very often they'd be running around flicking this mop at everybody – we have our fun. Everybody had fun – it was good.

So how many of you worked there then?

I think on our side there might have been twelve maybe fourteen...

Is that all women?

All women, yeah, yeah, the men worked in a different part. The men worked in – doing the coiling of the cottons, and also they made – I didn't realize what they were until yesterday – it was something to do with hoses and pipes to refill aeroplanes. When I looked – I looked on a website last night – and it came up Lewis & Tylor's – and I've written the name down somewhere for you – and it said that they started doing these rubberized pipes to refill aeroplanes and do hoses and all different things like that.

So quite heavy-duty stuff?

Yeah. There were men working there and we'd all come in for dinner and we had a lovely canteen when – she was only supposed to make the tea and coffee – but in the end, she ended up warming our food if we brought food in to be warmed, she'd warm it – it was just as if you were going into Askie's, it was lovely. One day somebody would bring in – someone – it was Susan that I worked with, she used to live in Penarth and she used to come over one day a week and she'd have a great big bag of pasties from the butcher's that they'd bought then, take them in – pasty each – nobody would get charged, person who brought them in paid for it and it'd be shared. And it was great – it was really good – I mean we had all old stools to sit on, by the time everything was sorted out it was just like sitting in Askie's lovely chairs. It was – lovely. Even the cleaning lady used to come around and sweep all around, all the cotton that was lying on the floor, even she was lovely – I can't remember her name. She worked there for years and unfortunately now, it's been so long I expect practically all the elderly ones now, you know, have – have gone. But if there was a job going you'd let a friend know, 'cos a couple of my friends came in after I started and it was absolutely amazing. I thoroughly enjoyed it. The only thing I wished was I could've have brought a loom home and done it myself at home now, I could've made some I think. Later on, they actually closed in Sloper Road and they moved down to York Place. That's – you know where IKEA is, well as you go down Clive Street and you turn to go towards IKEA, that little bit there is York Place. I think it's a furniture place, they do chairs and stuff there now, they actually moved in there. And I went back there, but all, all the girls that, you know I started off with, most of them married and families and moved away and they weren't there, it was a lot of Indians working there and it wasn't the same, it wasn't the same and then the foreman there was taken ill and he didn't come back and I thought, no, I'll leave now and my daughter's time to go to school so I became a dinner lady then. But

22:00

So you married and you continued working there after you'd had your children as well? So you were a working mum?

Yeah, yeah, I worked part-time. My niece did look after my little girl for me even though I had the two boys I didn't actually go back to the factory to work, I still had that loom at home so I was doing small work there and he was bringing belts for me to repair so I was doing it in between, at my own pace.

So, did you have maternity leave as such or...?

I did have, I did have maternity leave but I don't think it, I don't think I had any money, no...

You just took the time?

Yeah, I just took the time. But they were so, everybody was so supportive there – if somebody, as I said, if somebody was ill or even their partners was ill, we'd all rally round, you know, if somebody had had to rush off. Well I can tell you a time now when my sister was expecting my nephew and we were waiting on a 'phone call 'cos I said as soon as you have the baby you ring and let me know. Anyhow Mrs Bernard, that's the manageress, she come up and she said Jill there's a 'phone call for you so I shouts back and I said, oh, boy or girl, thinking it was my sister but it wasn't it was my uncle, my uncle had suddenly died and when I found out what it was, Mrs Bernard said, forget it, go on, off, go now and I didn't get stopped any money, they all rallied round. Honestly, it was really, really – home from home.

So, did you have – any trade unionism – did you have to belong to a union or..?

We did try to set one up once and we thought no, we won't bother for the simple reason being everybody's getting on so well, we sort out our own problems and we just

Didn't see the need for it?

There was no, no need at all. And the foreman, he was, he was very ill and he was off work for a long, long time and by this time his daughter had married and she had left. She'd come back and fore now and again and that's the only way we can get information from her. The management wouldn't let us know and apparently he was very, very ill so we all collected money and we bought a great big basket of fruit and flowers for his wife and my husband, then, at the time he was working somewhere – I don't know – he hadn't long had a car and he said, well I'll take you, where does he live? And – I can't actually remember where it was to, he lived – I now it was Fairwater, it was in a new estate in Fairwater. So he took me up there – he said, well I'm not coming in, so he carried the basket to the door and I took the flowers, I walked up the garden path, and I knocked on the door I remembered what Ken Holt had said – my dog don't like anybody wearing dresses, he goes for their crotch – and as soon as I knocked the door, I remembered, I thought oh my god, no, out comes the dog, but me in the crotch, oh my dress, so my dress ripped, my husband heard me screaming, he come running down the garden path and he went absolutely bananas. And I was saying, it's alright, it's alright, he haven't bit me, it's just my dress. And there's poor Ken Holt, going I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, and when he come back to work after a couple of weeks he give me a parcel and in this parcel was a new dress. And I always remember that, I always remember that. But it was – as I knocked the door I remembered what said, my dog don't like anybody in dresses, he always goes for their crotch. Oh my god, I've knocked the door.

26:08

Too late!

Yeah, it was too late, 'cos he did, he literally tore my dress but he didn't bite me. It was just my dress. And then when Josephine, that was his daughter, when she heard about it she was hysterical because Josephine and myself became very friendly because she knew nobody down here when they moved down here and we used to go to the New Theatre for shows and things like that. We went to see Tom Jones there and, yeah, we had lots of fun. We used to go to her house, we did have lots of fun. And it's funny then, when it all broke up we just seemed to lose touch. But the work, the work was hard, it was hard, I got to be honest, but I thoroughly enjoyed it and if they set it up again I think I'd go back again. I may not be so fast doing it this time. But it was really hard.

And did they pay well, Jill?

I think I started on four pounds something when I first started. But it wasn't the money, it was nice having the money, don't get me wrong, but I think if you're happy being in an environment I don't think it matters what they pay as long as you're happy, it's no good being in a place that you got plenty of money and you're not happy. It was, it was piecework as I said, if you, you know, if you didn't do your quota of belts, you know, you wouldn't get paid. And in the end, it did get a bit too much because the newer girls that was coming in was thinking, you know, just whack it out and, you know, and in the end I said to the foreman, I said I'm sorry they're coming back here now too many times, 'cos there was myself and another girl doing it, and I said they're getting paid more than what we are for turning out belts that are rubbish. So in the end he tried to stop the piecework until they got to a better quality of making a belt and then they brought it back in then but as soon as they know they could earn more money they just seemed to go off...

So who was checking – did you have, like, a quality control sort of thing or is that the foreman's job?

The foreman, yeah, the foreman did that and you'd see him walking round with half a dozen belts on one hand and half a dozen belts on the other and you're thinking, oh, I wish that one there with the least on his arm was the one for taking me for repair because when you had to repair a belt you had to like unpick it and then you had to redo it and the more times you unpick something the flimsier it gets. So in the end he did try and stop it and he said right, it's going to be stopped here, it's going to be stopped now, if I don't quality control these belts now and pass them, you don't get paid for them. So, then, so they all started pulling their socks up them and doing it as they should be.

And did you have to clock in and out?

Yes.

What sort of hours did you work then?

Eight o'clock – we start at eight o'clock and, I think it was five, eight 'til five...

Long day...

Yeah, you had a break in the morning and a break in the afternoon and then you had, I think it was an hour I think we had for dinner. It must have been an hour we have for dinner because we used to get up to rarers. Sometimes we'd go to the Black and White and have a dinner or more often...

What was the Black and White?

The Black and White is on the corner of North Clive Street – it's actually still there now. Used to do, used to do lovely dinners there.

29:55

Is that a café or a pub?

It's a café, yeah, café. Or if went to the pub we'd have to take the foreman with us. We weren't old enough at first, I wasn't old enough really to drink but the foreman came with us - if you're going to a pub I'm going to watch what you're drinking. And he made sure we only ever had one glass. And it was, it was just like being with family not workmates. But there you are – an instance. My aunty was looking – not the aunty that took me for the interview – another aunty. She was having family problems and she'd moved back down here and she wanted a job. Of course, nothing going, so I mentioned to the foreman and he said, well what can she do, and I said,

well, she'll lay her hand to anything, she'll try anything. He said, well, we're looking for somebody to coat the fiberglass belts. With the fibreglass, if you weaved a belt, it was really, really strong, if you pulled it that way. But if you rubbed your finger on it, it would fray, that's how fragile it was so with the fibreglass belts they used to get dipped into a solution and then put on a stretcher to stretch it back to the size that it was. So we're actually looking for somebody, he said, to help Lily – Lily was another lady who worked there – to help her do this job. Do you think she'd have a go at that? I said, well, you can only ask. Anyway, she did, she came and worked there, and she did, she did it for quite a while and then her husband come back on the scene and she didn't know whether to go back with her husband or you know to stay where she was – he wasn't a very nice person, her husband – and I'm talking now about my mother's sister, so she's a lot older than me, and the foreman said to her, well look, you've got a job here, if you don't feel safe, I can get you a job in another mill, and I can even get people up in that mill to house you, to get you away. And she wouldn't do it, she wouldn't do it. She stayed with us for a little bit longer and then her husband was making a nuisance, so she went back to her husband. And it didn't end up very nice. But she wished – I mean, he's gone now the husband – but she wished that she would've taken his offer of help then. But that's the sort of person he was, he wasn't like a foreman that you get today – he was – like family, all of them was like family. Everybody got on with everybody else. I did, I thoroughly enjoyed it.

So were – the photos that you've shown me – so, did all these girls work on your side?

Yeah, yes, I haven't got any photographs of the other side doing the flastic belts but I do bump into Pam, very often. To be honest, I think there's only really two people now which is Pam and I think it was Yvonne, they're the only two people that I think that's left from the flastic side. I think the others have passed. Lily – I got on really well with Lily – she was doing the flastics and then she went to help my aunty with coating the fibreglass belts. Well, her daughter ended up having a job in the actual office. So, if you knew a job was going, it would be given to people that was inside – knowing – you know. We had, we had trips, lots of trips and things...

I was going to say, you know, your outings, and Christmas parties or things like that, that you...

We always seemed to be going somewhere, always seemed to be doing something. And, like, on a Christmas time, you'd actually have a party on the actual shop-floor. And another thing, now, just thinking now, it would never happen now, in this day and age. We had something wrong with the big fluorescent lights over the looms and the person that came to fix them was actually someone that my husband knew from Pentyrch and we didn't know he was coming. So I'm on my loom now and I'm weaving away and you're bouncing – you are literally bouncing, weaving and that's all I heard was this fella laughing his... head off – I was going to swear then – he was laughing his head off and he thought I recognise that lass. Well I was like this and he was up the ladder and was over a loom where somebody was working, repairing a light. So you wouldn't have that now today. All health and safety. And I looked at him and I said oh, I recognise that laugh, what you doing here? He said what the hell does it look as if I'm doing, I'm mending the light. He said, what are you doing he said? He said, oh my god, he said, I've never seen anything so funny. He said you're bouncing around like a blue-arsed – these was his exact words – like a blue-arsed fly. I said that's how you weave a belt. So he stood there, he got down off the ladder, and he stood there and he watched me and the person that was next to me, and seeing who was the fastest weaver. Oh, I can't believe that, I can't believe that he said, I've never seen anything so funny. I said, oh, thank you very much, I said, this is my job and I enjoy it so go do yours. But he did, he fixed the lights and then when we actually went up to Pentyrch then, to see my husband's parents, he lived a couple of doors away and he actually seen the car and he come down. He said, oh, Keith, he said – which, that was my husband – Keith he said, have you ever seen her weaving? No, he said, I don't want to see her weaving, he said, her hands are hard enough, he said. It's like having something rubbing on your back, he said, they're full of calluses, he said. He said, she don't need a back-scratcher. So, yeah, he said, oh my god, I've never seen anything so funny. And he said, they're

bouncing all over the place, he said. They're swinging on the top thing, he said, she must have muscles like Popeye. That was his exact words, I always remember it. I said, cheeky so-and-so. But we loved it. And we did used to have races to see who could finish, a belt.

36:33

Was it dangerous work, do you think? Was there any sort of...

It was only dangerous if the weights fell off and hit you on a finger. Because once a belt was put in you had an arm and you pull this arm down and then maybe, three grooves, three or four grooves, and you would pick up weights, big weights, and put them on the end of this arm to stretch the belt. If it wasn't heavy enough you take another round weight and stick it on the thing...

Like the ones they used to have on those old scales?

Yeah, but there was a groove in it to fit on a thing and very often you'd put too many weights on and not thinking and when you'd go to take it off you'd go oomph and be over the machine like. You could stab yourself with the needles, so wire could snap, you could fall and trip and break your neck on all the string that was on the floor. 'Cos the strings I brought you here now – not strings, it's cottons – this one ball of cotton here you could make that out of that – but there was so many different thicknesses and the way you do the thickness is you'd untwist it, you'd have three strands, and then each of those strands – you got to bear with me now 'cos I've got me glasses on as I'm going blind – on each of these strands – you have three strands – see the three strands on each of these strands – that's, three, six, nine – so that'd be a ball of nine sixteenths. Then you'd have another one that would have four strands with different amounts in and each one would be thicker and thicker – this one is a thin-ish one but you could have twelve sixteenths, eighteen, they're all different sizes. And you make a belt with different size cottons. So there'd be different thicknesses, different widths,

And so would you do, would you do a certain amount of one size and then move on to another, you'd know what you'd have to do for that day, sorting of thing?

The foreman would come over and he would say right, I need, say, six, three and a half inch cottons so somebody would say, oh yeah, I'll do them. But then he'd say, right okay then, you can do two, you can do two or... and he'd split them up so they were doing different ones because the thicker the stuff the harder the belt was to do. This was harder on your fingers because you'd actually catch it – if you were weaving like this, you'd catch it, so the thinner it got the more chance you'd have a cut. Yeah, the thicker it was, it was easier on your little fingers but it was harder to beat because you had to keep the same width in between each of those...

39:55

Your hands look fine now...

They're lovely, now, yeah. Fairy liquid hands. But honestly, I couldn't weave with rings on – you'd have to take your rings off because you would literally have on each of your fingers, there, and your palms, you would actually have blisters but they – with working so much they'd go hard, like calluses. They are, they were calluses on your hand. So you didn't, we didn't, none of us had very nice hands. The only ones that had nice hands was the ones that was using the mop and bucket. Because it was soft weaving and they actually had a metal beater – they used a shuttle, they'd throw the shuttle through and catch it with this underneath and beat it like that whereas ours, we'd use our – same as them – they had their feet open in shafts, we'd open the shafts with our feet but we had a beater that you had to use two hands and pull your whole body weight, just like rowing, you know how a rower goes, you would literally be pulling it because the string would be

around, or rather the cotton would be around the beater so each time you sort of flick your beater – bang, flick, bang, flick – just to let the cotton come off, and then...

Quite physical, then, wasn't it?

It was, yeah, it was – you had enough exercise to last you a lifetime. And when that beater then became empty with the cotton you just hold it in your hand like that and just go round and round and round and then when it was full then you'd start off again. And do it again. But it was – I got to be fair – if they opened up another one – everything's all electrical now, isn't it? They showed online last night all the electric looms and...

So you must almost stand there and watch it now, just doing its thing?

Yeah, 'cos, Anne, who is this lady here, she started there before me but she didn't have any ideas on how to warp one of the wider belts. She used a power loom which made an inch wide belt. But it was really long so must've used about, I'd say, twelve wires but they had big holes in the wires and she just done them in a matter of seconds and then she put them onto this loom and just pressed the button and waited – well it wasn't a button it was a handle – and she stood there with the handle and when that was finished she was supposed to have sewed them in. What we called sewed them in, finished them off. And she just used to hang them up and forget about them and when I was sat talking to her I'd pull one down and I'm talking to her and I'd sew it in. And then somebody else would go over and talk to her and make it just so the foreman couldn't say, ay, you're not doing any work but we'd – you know – help one another. And there was one loom, I don't know why, every loom looked the same but there was one loom that everybody loved. I don't know what it was, they were all exactly the same. And we used to fight to try and get on this one loom. And if somebody hadn't finished a belt by the time you were due to go home, the belt was still in that loom and a person came in earlier in the morning, they'd jump on that loom quick, finish the belt off, hang it up ready for the other woman to come in and they'd put their belt in to do it. I don't know why – even myself – I was saying, always seemed to be, you seemed to have a better quality belt off it.

43:47

So you never had the same workplace – you didn't have your one loom and that's the one you were stuck with?

Yeah, whoever was finished on that loom – if it was empty – anybody, you just, you'd be looking around to see who was nearest, quick, quick, I only got a couple more to go. You'd go made trying to finish putting the wires in. And very often two of you would be there and you'd go, oh go on then, you can have it. But I've known one girl used to warp two belts and hang it up upside down with the wires on the bottom so they wouldn't get tangled and she would literally wait 'til that loom was empty before she went and weaved. But it was identical to all the others – I don't, I can't, I've used all the looms and this one loom was different. The only thing that we had of our own – well, I had my own anyway, I always wanted to keep my own wires and my own rods, my own beater, my own needle and my own tape. And everybody then started to keep their own and if you were on holidays, what you'd do, the foreman would give you greased brown paper and he'd put your wires in there and he'd wrap it in the brown paper, he put your name on it and say, right they're there for when you come back off from your holidays and they would be. He'd put them in the draw and they'd be there. But you'd know if somebody had had them because they wouldn't have been put back the same way.

And so, were the looms – is the principle the same as for weaving, I don't know, wool or... you know, is it a similar sort of process?

Yes, it is a similar sort of process. We had what we call a roller on the front – probably a bit rounder than that, little bit longer, and there was two prongs, and you'd fit the roller, and so obviously you'd work your belt, the front of the belt over the front, drop it right down, then you'd pull it through and you take it to exactly the same thing at the back end but there was a nut and bolts on the back end you had to screw tight, you had to make sure that was tight because it would twist and if that twisted you'd have a twisted belt. And then you'd put the metal rods into the shafts – there was four, like empty picture frames – that's the only way I can explain it, like empty picture frames, there's holes top and bottom and you had four of them and you put these rods on and on the end of the one rod there was a spring so you could push it in and then get the other end in so the spring would then push it out and hold it there. And you do it top and bottom so you got – say each one of these strands is the cotton you've got a wire and everyone of them like that with a rod top and bottom and then when you step on the pedals the shafts open – like that – now you can do a plain two shaft which is just normal like a knitting – plain – then you could have a four shaft which would be, I supposed, pearl, on knitting, so it's just a different pattern. Then you could have a herringbone – now we did quite a few herringbones – the herringbone would be one pattern going down the one side of the belt; through the middle you'd have like a 'V' going right the way through the belt and the other side of the belt then, would be pattern going the other way.

47:46

Bit like tweed isn't it?

Yeah, yeah and that was called a herringbone belt. You could even have a belt like the hair belts - it would be warped in the hair but it would be weaved with ordinary cotton for the simple reason being that the hair stuck together. So when you stood on the pedals – you literally had to stand on the pedals and stretch it open. So it was actually weaved with that.

So why did they use camel hair then and not horse hair?

I don't know, I really don't know, whether it was easier to come by – oh, but the smell on it was terrible. It was terrible – fortunately we didn't have as many of them to do, it was only like a special order come in, every now and again, we had to do that and I couldn't even tell you what they were used for. I couldn't tell you. But they were hard to do, they were, I got to be fair. Even to sew them when you were finished, they were hard to do.

Hard work?

Yeah, but lovely work.

And good fun?

It was, yeah, fun, everybody had a laugh. I even used to take a record player in with me.

I was going to say...

My father bought me years ago from – I think the shop was called John James in Clare Road, there used to be a little electrical shop and he bought me a portable record player. I still got it actually and it does still work. And it was only size about twelve inches big – had a lid on it – it had a radio on it and you'd come in and somebody would say, oh, I got this record today can we put that on. Yeah, put it on and I used to plug it in and have the music there and we seemed to work better with music. And then you'd hear Mrs Bernard, can somebody turn that record over it's getting on my nerves because her office was practically where we had the record player plugged in. Take that record off and we put something else on and then we decide, oh, we'll have the radio on for a bit. But I used to take that in every morning.

So could you talk to each other above the noise of the loom?

Yeah, you had to shout, you couldn't talk normally, you had to shout. When the power loom was on then it was even noisier. So yeah, you were always talking, you never got stopped talking.

Were you allowed to smoke in there or..?

You could have a cigarette but you could only go in certain parts because of the cotton. You couldn't actually smoke in there. You could go in the toilet and have a cigarette – I mean I didn't smoke but they'd go in the toilet and have a cigarette or they'd go, you know, outside and have a cigarette. The big double doors and stand outside. If you was looking down the street and you seen somebody running 'cos they were late you'd pick up their card and clock them in. Yeah, stick the card in and put it back then. Number 60 my clock-in card was, I do remember that.

And did you have paid holidays?

Yeah, we had Bank Holidays, we had holidays as long as there wasn't too many of us off you could have holiday anytime and if you needed time off they wouldn't stop you. You know, they would allow it. And if they knew, you come in at anytime – 'cos sometimes, we did have rather a lot of hot weather and 'cos it was on a tin roof it used to get really, really hot in the summer and really, really cold in the winter and in the summer he asked if any of us wanted to come in early and go home early and a lot of us did. We used to come in and he'd be there – he'd wait until the last one went home. But that's how good it was good because Jackie actually when she got married – this is Jackie here – she married one of the boys that worked there, Phillip, when they got married they had nowhere to live so they rented one of the houses that Mr Lawson owned. He owned three of the houses that was just past the factory and they rented that out till they could get a place. I mean not many managers...

Companies would do that.

No, they rented that off them for a long, long time. Then they, I think it was Fairwater, or Ely, they moved after.

52:40

Tell us about your outings then?

Ohh god.

So did everyone in the factory go, all the boys as well?

Yeah, the boys went as well. I should've bought it – what I'll do, when I go home, I'll pick up the other photographs that I've got. We're on an open top bus, all at the back, no, we didn't rent this open top bus, everybody else was on there. Do you mind, this is a private photo, can you move back a bit! Yeah, we went to Weston quite a few times and we always had enough money over to buy a meal or whatever so you didn't have to pay for anything.

So how did you get to Weston then – would you have got the boat?

So, sometimes we'd go on a boat and then sometimes we would hire a bus from here and go over on a bus. But we had rarers – I got one photograph of me and my husband to this day insists I'm smoothing a cow. I said it's not it's a donkey. He said it's not it's a cow. He said donkeys don't

haver spots and that one got spots like a cow. And it's not it's a donkey but you can't see his shoes. But yeah, we had rarers –

What are rarers?

Fun! Fun!

Okay – I've never heard that word before.

Rarers or raaarers!

Is that a Cardiff word?

Yeah, I come from Cardiff, a Cardiff word. Got up to so much – you did have so much fun. I mean you buried one another in the sand down there, there was no hurry to get home. You'd have kiss me quick hats on, it was... we went to Barry, we went to quite a few places. And then we had parties so that even if somebody was having a party outside of work, you'd get invited.

So it was a good social life?

Yes, yeah and everybody, other than work, you know they would involve you in whatever. I mean, we used to go into town and have a drink all together in town. But it was just so funny because the year I got married everybody else decided oh, I'm going to get married too so there was quite a few weddings the year I got married.

And your husband was happy for you to work?

He didn't mind as long as I was happy. He didn't mind, didn't mind at all. But then, as I said, when I stopped 'cos it wasn't the same when they moved over to York Place. I didn't think it was anyway. So I just thought, it's time to go now. But I do remember one time we had a lot of Indian people came in for jobs and a few of them did stay but then some of them were dropping off like flies. And they had TB.

55:35

Oh, no...

Yeah, we all had to go for TB tests. I remember that. I do remember that. We all had to go up – Cathedral Road somewhere I think we went to if I remember rightly. And they shut the factory down for a bit and then we all started to go back. TB – brought TB in. They don't check now, see, do they, for TB?

They get jabs at school don't they?

Yeah, yeah. I can only remember Kanta(?), the one girl, she was a nice girl. There was another one – she was lovely the other one, I can't remember her name. She actually had to go back over to... I think it was Kenya she had to go to, they'd made an arranged marriage for her and she didn't want to go. And she came back – and she was as happy as Larry when she come back and I thought, oh, it must have worked out nice, she must have had a nice connection with the husband, like. No, he died! When I said, oh my god, I said, how did that happen and she said before we were due to get on the plane to come back over here. She said and he was years older than me, she said he was horrible. And I actually see her, what we call down the road, which is Penarth Road and Sloper Road and all the road, down the road, and I very often see her and she looks dreadful and she was younger than me. And apparently because they married, you don't really marry the

husband you marry the husband's family and they had her out working and all her money was taken off her. It was terrible.

She never remarried?

Never remarried. Not that I know of anyway. Not that I know of. I think that first marriage was bad enough. But you know, even though they were foreigners you got on with them. You know, there was a few of them working there and there was no – they weren't pushed to one side, they were involved with us, like, you know. But I do always remember about that – I felt so sorry for her. So sorry for her. But that's life isn't it. That's life. But I've had a good life, I can't complain. I can, but nobody listens! My sense of humour's just like my father's. Nobody knew how to take him...

So when you finished then, you said you became a dinner lady?

Yeah, I worked as a dinner lady at St Mary's over the docks.

Oh, right...

Yeah, I worked there for a number of years. And then...

58:27

Good fun?

Not as good as in the factory – it was nice. The kids was fun. I remember one day with the kids over there they found a bag over where the Salvation Army place was – and the dinner lady, I can't remember her name it was – what are you doing over in the Salvation Army place, you've been told you're not supposed to go over there. Yeah, the ball went over there, Miss, so we had to go and get the ball but we found a bag. Well leave the bag there you don't know what's in the bag. Yeah, we know what's in the bag, Miss, it's full of money. What do you mean, it's full of money? Well, it's full of money. Somebody had dumped it there ready to pick up so we had the police and everything over the kitchens, investigating everything and, oh, the kids thought it was wonderful. We did have a nice time, I was there for a while and then my father passed away – 1999 – no, my mother was 1999 – my father passed away before that. And I just couldn't cope 'cos my father was very close with me and I just couldn't cope there. So I had a bit of time off and then I said to my husband I can't got back, I don't want to go back, so I didn't go back.

Yep.

So I just done a bit of cleaning here and there and just never went back.

What did your dad do? For a living?

My father was actually a builder years ago for D O'Neill & Sons in Croft Street. When they retired, two brothers owned it, when they retired they just shut the place. So my father was devastated and he went a long time without a job and he ended up getting a job but he worked away and my father was never away from home and, oh, he hated it. And it was so sad to see him, he looked so lost. We said right, you're not going back – 'phone them up, tell them. I got to have the money, we got to have... No you're not going back. Anyway, he didn't go back and he had a 'phone call from HMS Cambria, the ship people, in Sully, they were looking for a nights security guard. Oh, he said, I don't know what to do, I can't work nights. So, my two sons, they both worked nights and they said to him, gramps, you know, it's not too bad, you... try it and see. Anyway, he went and he loved it. And they loved him. Because my father was a Navy man, 'cos

he was in the Navy in the war. And he was so smart. If my husband had of said to him, oh, come on, let's go for a pint? Yeah, okay. Hour later, my father still wasn't ready. He had to polish his shoes, he had to put his tie on, he had to make sure he had creases down his trousers, so if my husband wanted to go for a pint then he'd ask him the day before, so he'd be ready. So of course, when had this job, they fitted him out with a full uniform and they said that the whole time that he worked with them, they've never had anything so spick and span, he used to polish the cannon, he used to polish the bells, he loved it, he did, and he was there for years and then of course he retired. But when he retired he'd still go over there. And they'd have bonfire parties over there so all of them the grandkids and everybody would go over. Fantastic times. Then when he passed away the pastor over there said can I do the service? So he did the service and they actually done Barry Lifeboat as well and they scattered the ashes of the Sully Point. Right where HMS Cambria is, so he was happy. But he couldn't swim a stroke. He couldn't swim a stroke. But that's what happened with my father.

62:33

And did your mum work, at all?

Oh, mum worked for years. She worked in the little corner-shop as a cleaner and when they were busy she used to help out serving behind the counter. And one day she went in there and there was somebody else there serving behind the counter and she looked at Ginger – that was the owner – who's that? He said, oh, we've employed her to help out so my mother turned round and walked out. Next day the woman's gone and my mother's back serving behind the counter. Well, she said, Ginge, I was good enough to help out when you was busy. She worked there for years and in fact I can remember we had a.... sugar shortage – we had that! And my mother was terrible 'cos I think because my mother came from a big family that was the main object, the cupboard have got to be full of food. So she was supplying the shop with sugar! Every time somebody wanted sugar he'd send them down my mother's... for sugar, I always remember that. And the shop used to have tins where the labels had come off and they were going to throw them away and my mum said don't throw them away, shake them and you can see what they are so he said have them then, take them home. Very often my mother would say, right Al – that's my father, Albert – what you going to have for tea? I don't know, what you got? I think this is – whatever, you know, she was never right, so he had a mixture of old tins to choose from. It was so funny – we did have a laugh, we had nothing but we had everything. It was, it was, well...

And were they Cardiff born and bred?

Yeah, yes. My mother's, my mother was actually born three doors away from where I was born but her father was born in Grange Farm, The Burfords in Grange Farm. So that's, it's all the family All of them and my mother's eldest brother, he was actually born in a farm. And she was one of ten. And they all married all bar one. They all had big families as well.

So you've got a big family then, haven't you?

I got three children now, I did have three boys but obviously I said my first one passed away. So I got two boys and I got a daughter. My daughter married two years ago. My one son lives in South Clive Street, my daughter lives in the next street – Stockland Street – and my eldest son is living in Brighton. We just come back from there now, that's why I couldn't do the interview before. My second grandson was a twelve month old and oh, I can't get over how they've grown up.

Long way, though isn't it, Brighton?

It is, yeah. I was lucky this time my daughter drove us down so it didn't take too long in a car. But on a train it's a nightmare 'cos you got to take two trains and you got up and down the stairs going

across the station – it's a nightmare. But yeah, they're all lovely kids. Brought up as I was brought up. Respect – and I think a lot of children are missing this today, respect. Terrible.

Have they all got your sense of humour as well, like a laugh?

My daughter has – my two sons are more like their father. Very short fuse. Yeah, my daughter got a sense of humour. If you don't know me... 'cos I know my father was always the funny one in the family with people that didn't know him and when they got to know him 'cos he was as straight as a die. 'Cos I'm like, if I meet somebody I can take an instant dislike to them. I wouldn't be disrespectful to them, I would speak to them, but I wouldn't go out of my way then to meet them again. And, and I'm funny like that. I don't know why. It was like this morning, you know, before I phoned you, I said to my son, he was there just finished nights, he always comes in for breakfast before he goes home, I said to my son oh, I wish Gemma would phone. I goes out the passage and the 'phone goes. He said, mum, will you stop being psychic. And it was Gemma. That's my daughter. But I say things and it happens. So I think now before I say things. I do believe that. I do believe that. But as far as the working's concerned, if I was eighty-five I'd still have a go at the weaving. I've even brought over – that's the nylon, that's thinner again, that is. And what a nightmare that was.

67:31

Ooohhh, yeah

Yeah, a nightmare. This is the original tape that we had – everyone had one of these. And I used, this, I used this everyday. You got to measure it around, you got to measure it around – you had three poles and you had to measure it around – even though it had been checked beforehand you still had to measure it around to make sure it was right for the length of the belt. And then you had to make sure then how big it was for the width of the belt. Sometimes it would be twelve inches wide – that was hard to do a twelve inch because your roller was only twelve inches so you knew went over size if it dropped off the end of the roller. And these are the needles. My daughter have actually used that – look how I've bent it – that's the actual needle that we used to actually sew in the holes where the wires come out.

It's thick, isn't it?

Mmm. And that one there is what you used to pick out where you'd made a mistake in the belt so you could pick it all the way through the belt. Sometimes it was easier to weave it with the mistake in it and then do it after but this one is – oh – bent, terrible. And then we had a bigger needle – about as thick as a pencil but longer than a pencil though, and you actually used that if you couldn't get too close to the wires because there was so many wires there, you had to leave a bigger gap so you had to actually use the bigger needle in which to stitch through up and down each one and then pull it to make the weave and the weft together.

Back to your rowing...

Yeah, back to the rowing but with a needle. It was, it was amazing and that's the end result. I stuck it in the draw you can see how tacky it's gone. I actually cut that to make this but this was connected.

I remember those belts – they used to be really fashionable didn't they?

Yeah,

In the eighties, I think it was...

Yeah, but I can't even get it off, been on here for years. But each one of those rows – this is what we called a single shaft – when you take the wires, if you can imagine, you'd have a gap like that and it'd be whole and the wires would come out, you got to twist the wires out and then you got to go up and down and keep it exactly the same so when you look at that belt...

It's all got to be..

Exactly the same. The only time you can tell where those wires were is you might have a little bit of dirt where you've spun them around to get them out...

You'd have to have good eyesight, wouldn't you?

You had to have good eyesight there, yeah. Yeah, you had to have good eyesight.

So when you said about your hearing, Jill, that was affected then by... it didn't cause any more damage to your hearing?

It made it worse...

Oh, it did?

Yeah, because I had meningitis as a baby so I was left with no hearing really in my left ear and over the years then I ended up having a mastoid in my right ear so I had an operation for that, I was eleven when I had that done. But over the years, working where it was loud, it didn't help any so I seem to think that did make it slightly worse than what it would have been if I wasn't working in a noisy environment. But as I said, I got two hearing aids now – I don't actually wear this one as I find it's – I'm not even with it – I'm uneven listening. I'd sooner listen with just the one. But I'd still work there, I loved it, I really did. So many good memories there. Yeah, so many good people. You know, if you did hear of anybody passing away from the work there, you'd attend the funeral or, you know, it's... It was really, really nice.

71:54

Good times.

Yeah, good times, you don't get that type of feeling now in jobs they got today. I don't think so. You're very, very lucky if you have but I don't think in an environment like that. 'Cos the management was just as bad as what we were. They were, they were just as bad. I can see them all now. And we did actually have – Johnny, his name was called – he was disabled, really disabled legs and he worked there for years. He was there before I started. But he worked out the other side of the place where they were making the hoses and that. He was a lovely – well all of them, everyone of them, even if you didn't see them, you know, much in the day, if they passed through, they, alright everybody, yeah fine. But Johnny was there for a long, long time. And then you had another two boys – I can't think what their names were – it was their aunty that worked there and she brought them two in. And they were working in her part, coiling up all the weft and that. But it was nice. It was all concrete floors, really cold in the winter.

I can imagine, yeah.

Yeah, really cold. And it was a good idea when I said about the summer, coming in earlier, so you could not have to sweat like. 'Cos it was, it was hot work.

So it must have changed quite a lot around here then? You've seen it over the years.

It's changed an awful lot, yeah. It was like when we bought a new three-piece suite, a leather three-piece suite, it was from the Leather Sofa Company, which is actually took over where we worked. And it was so uncanny walking around and the fella's looking at me and he said, what you looking for. I said I used to work here and there used to be all the offices upstairs. I said have you still got the leak? And he said, oh, don't mention the leak to me, it's been a nightmare and we cannot get rid of it. And we always had a leak and we couldn't get rid of it. We couldn't get rid of it and we always had a leak in the one part of the roof 'cos the roof there was flat – it was like that way, flat and then it went down like that and all that flat part always leaked. We could never get rid of it – we always had a bucket there. It was funny because the sofa company had exactly the same thing.

And are they still there selling the sofas?

There's another company there now, it's different people.

But same building?

Exactly the same buildings, yeah.

Brilliant.

And we did do – vaguely thinking now – something for Dunlop. I don't know whether it was the artificial grass – like the rubberised artificial grass – Dunlop, for the tennis. I'm sure there was something mentioned about doing it for the tennis for Dunlop. But that was in another part because even though it was only owned by Lewis & Tylor there was all different rooms. We had the one big room where we were weaving and then you had like a big double door where they were doing the spinning of the... and then you had another door then going somewhere else and it was just all little places everywhere.

And all owned by that...

Yeah.

So how many people worked there altogether then, do you reckon?

Must have been about twelve on our side, there was two, four six, eight to ten on the old looms, what I call the old looms which were small, really small. And then there was two... there must have been about fifteen, sixteen people in the other part, there must have been. Can't remember all their names but I can see their – I'm good with faces – yeah, I can see their faces so I'm just going through their faces. And they all, just did all they could to help everybody. You know, help everyone out.

76:24

Brilliant.

I hope I haven't bored you.

Not at all, not at all, I'm just very aware that I'm keeping you talking and it's an hour and a quarter, I can't believe how quickly it's gone.

Never!

Yeah.

I didn't believe it was going to be that long.

Yeah, I'm going to pause it, shall I? There we are.

On the photograph – this is of the loom here. And all the dust here used to be cleaned but when you're weaving it's the dust coming off the cotton. And this is the three bars that I'm on about where you actually wind the cotton on. Something I didn't tell you – when you wind that cotton on there you mustn't cross the cotton over...

Oh, I see...

They got to be – every one has got to be in that line, even if you push them together you must not cross them over. Because what would happen then if you crossed them over you could warp it right – when you got to the end you would have the cross at the end of the belt and there'd be no way you could fix that really. You'd have to cut it out and pull the whole thing through. This thing here, this little bar here, is where you put the rods – there's four slats in there for the rods to go on and once the rods are on there each one of those strands you make sure you haven't crossed by going around just to make sure and once you know how to do it, you just know that you haven't crossed it. But if you were learning you would be told to carry that right the way around to make sure you've picked up the right one. But every one of them now have got to be put with one wire on. At the end of the day you were really tired. You could feel yourself nodding off. I could anyway. But you'd have a frame you can actually see the cotton there – see the cotton at the back there – that's a frame which holds – it was a nail – a long nail that they put the cotton ball on. And they put that on so it would come off the roll easy without having to tug. You could either have one like that or you could have a pole on the floor and it'd come up from the floor.

And what was her name, again?

Josie. She actually married Anne's brother. Anne's brother worked there for a while but she actually married Anne's brother. So everybody seemed to be connected with the family some way, like, you know.

That's a great photo.

Yeah. I enjoyed it.

79:02

END OF INTERVIEW/DIWEDD CYFWELIAD