

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/ LLEISIAU O LAWR Y FFATRI

Gainsborough Flowers – Porth, Roller Blind Factory - Llwynypia

Interviewee: VSE067 Christine Chapman

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Interviewer: Catrin Edwards on behalf of Women's Archive of Wales/Archif Menywod Cymru

I'm Christine Chapman. My date of birth is 7 April 1956.

Family background?

I was an only child. Both my parents have passed away now. Born in Porth. My father worked in BOAC, which then became British Airways. He worked for many years there, forty years. My mother, she always worked. I think she went back to work when I was about two or three. She worked in factories, but in the office. She worked in a number of the Rhondda companies, like Flex Fasteners, but in the office. The she worked for many years in Aber Rhondda Garage doing the accounts. She worked until she was seventy actually. She used to find me these jobs because she came into contact with quite a lot of business people. She was always finding me part-time jobs, so that was useful really.

Education?

I went to Trealaw Primary School. My mother had gone back to work then so my grandmother, grandparents looked after me so I was in the school that was out of the catchment area, but I eventually went to Porth County Grammar School. I passed the eleven plus and went to Porth County Girls School. Stayed on into the Sixth Form. I had to do my A Levels twice, then I went onto Aberystwyth University, did my degree in History. Came out and worked and I've done part-time studies since then, Master's MPhil and teacher training, careers diploma, and then worked.

Which factory was it that you worked in?

I worked in, I can't remember, it was possibly when I was in the Sixth Form. I worked in Gainsborough Flowers. This was a factory, I think it started in Pontypridd but when I worked it was in Porth, in an old church. It was a real little sweat shop. There was a family, a German family, two German men ran it and it was mainly women. They'd have one man, I always remember who was in charge but all the women were on the machines. When I look back they were really, really old fashioned machines. What we were doing, it was artificial flowers. The work I was doing was actually, you'd have pieces of material in the shape of petals, but you had to shape them. So you'd put them in this machine which was

actually lit underneath by a candle. It was so old fashioned. You put the press on it and you'd make the shape of the petal so you'd end up with all these petals and leaves. There were tables then where other women would put them together so it was artificial flowers. It was all women doing that. I was on the machines and then this one man, who was on the packing so he seemed to be the one in charge of sorting all the boxes. Interestingly enough when we there a friend of mine came as well. He obviously fancied her because he instantly wanted her to work with him in the place where they made the boxes. He did ask her out afterwards, so there was obviously some ulterior motive there! We were probably into our late teens then. I thought that was quite funny really. She was taken off to work on her own with him doing the boxes, packing.

You think you were in school then?

It was either late teens or I think the first summer I was in university I worked for three weeks in a factory, in a roller blind factory in Llwynapia. I think the second year then I worked doing hotel work in Bournemouth, so I think it was the Sixth Form when I did Gainsborough Flowers.

Why did you go and work there?

Well my mother got me the job. I've done loads of part-time work in my time, because my mother working in Aber Rhondda Garage, which was a big business in Porth. She used to see all these different business people coming in. She got to know these. She was great at finding people jobs, that's why I worked there. It was through her contacts that the roller blind factory was probably what she did as well.

Did you know anybody there or did you go with a friend?

I can't remember whether it was one summer or two summers, but I know my friend Susan was with me. I'll see her probably in a few weeks and I'll ask her. We were there together and of course, as you can imagine, most of these people were there doing fulltime work, we were going on to university and college, so they probably looked at us in a very different way. Towards the end of it I probably got used to it but there was quite a bit of bitchiness, we'd say now. They would take great delight in trying to make a fool of you sometimes.

The other women?

Yes, the other women. I remember one time. This is funny now, but there was a machine where because you had to put different presses, this thing you had to put into the machine. If the press wouldn't stay in the machine they would try to block the hole with bits of material. I remember trying to do this and must have pulled loads and loads of material and somebody came along and said, 'Oh my gosh, all this stuff she's put in her hole!' That was the sort of things they would like to say and would take great delight in telling the whole of the factory really. It was good character building really.

Why do you think that was?

I think it was part of the banter really. When you're young you're a bit more sensitive to it. It was part of the banter really. Funny enough, when I worked, I'm talking about Gainsborough Flowers now, but when I worked in the other factory, because I was quite bored making these roller blinds I used to time myself. I was actually, one day the boss came up to me and offered me a fulltime job, because I was so fast. Interestingly then I had a visit from the Trades Union person to say, 'Can you slow down please because you're...' I'm a big trades unionist, don't get me wrong. But because I was think that I've got to get through this I'll give myself targets, but they actually told me to slow down. I was offered a fulltime job!

Do you think there was a little bit of animosity because you were destined to be students?

Yes, funnily enough, this was not the factory, but before that I think my first part-time job, I worked in Woolworths. Literally I was fourteen or fifteen, on a Saturday. I remember having one older girl, she wasn't much older than me, three or four years maybe. She was a fulltime job and she was really horrible to me. She used to say, 'Why are you bothering to go to university?' Because I had said that I wanted to go to university. 'You are only going to get married so what's the point?' I think it was that in some respects really. Some of them were lovely, don't get me wrong, but they tended to, I remember one supervisor was quite nasty and I suppose this is the group mentality sometimes. When they were on their own, they were quite nice but when one of them started they all.. It was a form of bullying in some respects really. I got through it and said my piece and there were some quite funny things. Some quite good stories that you come out with at the end. It didn't put me off. It was money. It wasn't much, hardly anything, but I don't regret doing it really.

Why do you think they took on extra workers at that time?

It's funny that. I suppose it was a time when there was lots of work about. It's so different now. There was always lots of work around.

You were doing it really as a holiday job?

Maybe people left and they were always short staffed. A woman that I interviewed who worked there years ago, she only lasted three days. That was many years before worked there. She was in Pontypridd, but she said it was a terrible place. I think it did have a bit of a reputation anyway, so presumably people, some people stayed for ever and some didn't. It wasn't the best factory. The other one was a bit nicer, the roller blind factory in Llynopia, which I've forgotten the name of. That was a bit better. This particular factory, to be honest the bosses weren't very nice either. They could be OK sometimes. They were quite rude with the women, very, well they talked down to the women. You had to take it in turns to go to the toilet. You had to put your hand up to take it in turns to go to the toilet. I think some of them used to smoke as well. There was a smoke break as well. Probably in a way it is like some of the call centres now really, the same sort of approach.

I know your mother told you about the job, but did you have to have an interview to get the job? I'm talking about Gainsborough now or either of them.

I can't remember if I'd just gone down there first so that they could see me. Hardly anything really. It was very easy work to pick up.

Did you have any training?

11.45 On the job. I had a machine. It was a very old fashioned iron machine and the press would come down. I would be using my foot and you'd put the petal in there and this press would come down and you'd take it out. The it would be in the shape of the petals. That was it really. That was my work all day!

What were your first impressions when you walked into the factory of the factory floor?

It was very old fashioned. I haven't been to many factories recently. Yes I have, of course I get to some with work, but it was a very old fashioned factory, almost Victorian then. It was actually lit by a flame underneath, I don't quite know but it wasn't electric as I can remember. So you would have machines against the wall, but in the middle then there would be tables, big tables like this and women would be putting the flowers together so I was actually on the presses. In a way that was the least skilled part, what I was doing.

How many people worked there?

It wasn't a huge place. I would probably say about fifty. It was in a church if you can imagine, a converted church. If you were in Porth, there's the top end of North Road and then, I think it's flats now, they've turned it into flats. It's an old chapel or church. You can see the sort of size of it and there was a downstairs and an upstairs. I think the packaging, where this chap, who obviously liked my friend. Her job was making the boxes and she said her legs used to ache because she had to put these boxes where there was some sort of machine where she had stamp on them. It was quite heavy work in some respects.

Was it mainly women who worked there?

Yes all women, except this man who was in charge, like the supervisor there. If the film, 'Made in Dagenham', it's almost the Bob Hoskins role, but obviously Bob Hoskins was much nicer than this one was. It was all women making the artificial flowers, putting them together and the machines. Then you had the tow bosses, who were, I'm not sure whether they were brothers or cousins. They were two German men and I think there was a son as well, as part of the business. He was young and he was quite nice looking actually. That was it. There were women and this man in charge, like the supervisor, who used to make the boxes.

How did you feel when you walked in there? The ambiance?

15.40 I don't think I was unhappy about it. I certainly stayed there until the end because it was money. I wasn't terribly upset about it. It was just one of these things as I suppose I had worked before. As I said I had worked in Woolworths and it was probably on a par with that. I suppose I was used to that and accepted it really. I wasn't shocked or anything. Coming from the Rhondda it was something that you accept really. I was there, I went to work, that was it, got my money and thought, 'God I'm glad I'm not going to be here for ever!'

15.56 What time did you have to be there in the morning

I think it was half past eight to half past four.

Did you have to clock in?

Yes I think so. We did, yes.

What about breaks and things like that?

Obviously there was some sort of lunch break. I can't remember but I know with the sort of breaks, they had to tell you when you could go to break. And I think you told one of them if you went for a cup of tea or something, but if you wanted to go outside you almost had to put your hand up to go to the toilet. As I said, this is a place I'm not going to be here for too long so you just out up with it really.

So they didn't have formal breaks in the morning and afternoon then?

I don't think they did. I think it was just a question of people taking it in turns to take their break. It wasn't everyone shutting down and going off on break. I don't think so. I think it was people did it in some sort of rota really.

Did you ever have to work overtime?

No, no there was no overtime.

And no shifts there?

No, no. It was just Monday to Friday, half past eight to half past four.

This doesn't apply to you but did you have any paid holidays when working there?

No, it wouldn't have affected me. I think if anything, I might have had either a day off or either a morning. I think it was actually when I had my A level results. I can't remember which one, but I do vaguely remember perhaps having the morning or day off for that. I wouldn't have been paid for that anyway so, to get my results.

Where you aware of the arrangements for the holiday? Did they shut down?
I think they probably did. I think they probably would have shut down

Like the miners' fortnight.

Yes, possibly yes. I can't remember really so as I said I was probably there about six weeks, or eight weeks or something. I can't remember really. It wouldn't have been me. I was there all the time I think. It's a long time ago now, back in the early seventies really.

And the same for the other place as well?

Well I was only there for three weeks. That was a bigger factory. It seemed a bit more professional. That was up in Llynypia.

You say it was a bigger factory. Do you remember how many people?

Maybe a few hundred I think. I was making roller blinds there. That was quite a nice job. There was a way of doing it. I've forgotten what was. It was a bit more skilful I think. I could do the whole of a roller blind then so not just part of a flower really.

Were you part of a line in either of these jobs? Did people depend on your work?

No. Neither factory. I may have been given, in Gainsborough Flowers a box of petals, somebody next to me would have been given a different box of petals. I was given a box by this man and I would be making those finish and then onto the tables and another box. That's all I did

Do you remember how much you were paid?

Do you know what, something like fourteen pounds a week seems to spring to mind. Whether I'm right? Would that have been about right? Fourteen pounds a week?

What are we talking about, early seventies?

Early seventies. Probably '73, I don't know. Because when I worked in Woolworths on a Saturday, a full day on a Saturday, at fifteen. That would have been in '71, I think I was earning one pound fifty a day. After that I also worked in Evans Caterers. I liked that and that was one pound twenty-seven a day because it was slightly less hours. I'm just working out really, if that was a day. Something like fourteen pounds a week seems to spring to mind really, but I may be wrong.

That seems quite good money to me. How did it feel to you at the time?

It was great. But in those days you had those funny pay packets that you could see the coins through it. It was quite exciting really wasn't it? The notes sticking out the top. It was quite exciting, very exciting.

What did you do with the money? Did you have to give it to your Mum?

No, gosh no.

So it was all yours was it?

Yes it was all mine. My mother was brilliant. I was spoilt I 'spose. No it was all mine. I think my mother was keen on me working. She thought it was good for me. It is, it is good for people to work so it has given me a lot of experience I think.

Do you remember what you did with it then?

Well I was very sociable when I was younger. I was always going out with boys. Going out so presumably it would have been on that. Clothes, the usual stuff so..

So you blew it all?

Oh yes probably. Never saved at all. No.

How did you cope with the work, in your head?

Well it is as I said about the other factory. I suppose I'm a bit like it now. In some ways I think now, what can I do to make this bearable, not bearable but enjoyable. How can I, like I say in the roller blind factory, I'll set myself targets, so I can get these done. If I remember rightly, in Gainsborough Flowers there was a radio going on all the time so in some respects you could be in your own world, because you were facing a wall. You weren't facing out you were actually facing a wall. That didn't bother me so I quite like my own company. I suppose you daydream, plan things and there's a radio going and then you're turning round. There was this one woman who was the supervisor on the table, she was the one that used to come out with these bitchy comments and try and make fun of you and that sort of thing. That banter. There was sort of talk going on all the time really.

Were you allowed to talk then?

Well if I remember rightly, I think this German chap. I think he was called Fred and he looked a bit fierce and he'd come round and he'd tell people to stop talking. He was quite nasty sometimes, but then sometimes he would be quite kind as well. But the other, if I remember rightly wasn't nice at all, but his name was Fred. He could be quite nasty with the women, treating them, very servile really.

23.35 Did people used to sing to the radio?

Possibly, they possibly did because it was music it was. There was music on all the time, of course that's not allowed now unless you get a licence. There's a problem now with licences in workplace radios. There was sort of banter going on all the time

Did you ever feel part of that or did you always fell a bit on the outside?

No I think I felt part of it. What tended to happen there, was some not so nice women there who perhaps, in a group mentality would make fun of us or somebody else. It wasn't just me and then everybody was expected to pile it and then if you get some of these people on their own they could be quite kind as well. But that happens everywhere doesn't it? It's cowardly really but I suppose they're part of it. But no I think I just accepted it. People do get targeted like this sometimes. I think it is part of growing up, sometimes. I've learnt to be quite assertive you know, over the years.

Did you have to do a certain amount of work every day? Did you have to get through a certain amount and were you aware of time and motion people?

I suppose I was. I easily coped with that. In fact I worked too fast! But that was literally to get through the day. Funnily enough, do you know the playwright Frank Vickery? I don't know him, but I read somewhere when he chose to write his plays he would work in a factory because he could think his plays through in his head. I could understand that really. Your hope and dreams you can, whatever that was for me at that time. You can almost daydream and plan really.

You don't take your work home, do you?

No.no.

Did you have to wear an overall or uniform? Do you remember?

I think there might have been some sort of overall. I might be wrong on that. I can't remember. I think there might have been.

Was it supplied by the factory?

Possibly. It may have been that they said, 'Bring an overall.' Don't know why but I might be wrong. I might have brought my own and my mother would have got it for me, probably. I can't really remember. I've got a feeling that Susan, who was in packaging, had some sort of coat. She had some sort of male type overall, but I can't remember. I'm going to ask her in a few weeks, what she can remember.

26.49 Do you remember how you got to work?

I walked. It wasn't far. It was probably half a mile. I could walk to work, it wasn't far.

Was the factory floor noisy?

Yes it was quite noisy, yes.

And what about the other conditions? The heat and the cold, well it was summer when you were there.

Well as I said it was an old church. Summer it would have been fine, but a bit grim looking really. Noisy, radio was on and lots of banter, talking, machines.

You were only there in the summer, so you weren't too cold then?

No

Was it too hot d'you think? Or was it OK?

It might have been. They might have decided to let the door open. Let the front door of the church bit. I can't remember now. It wasn't a nice environment really. It didn't put me off

What about the language of the women?

To be fair I don't think the language was that bad. I hear worse now. I think there were quite risqué conversations going on but I don't think they used the 'f' word or anything. You would now actually, if you went into a factory now but I don't think they did. But I think quite risqué sort of joke, not joke but stories then. When I was going out with my friends I could repeat some of these and have a good laugh about them. They were quite funny really.

Can you remember anything now?

Well it's a bit rude really, but I do remember one of the women, obviously she'd had sex with her husband and he had ejaculated and it was in the house somewhere and it had gone everywhere, in the little ornaments on the fireplace or something. So off course that was a wonderful story. Everybody in the factory knew this and it was a wonderful story for me to tell when I went out with my friends and family. It was great then. Yes there were quite risqué stories really.

Were you ever shocked at all or were you quite cool about it.

No I wasn't shocked really. It was just sort of funny. In a way it gave me a different insight to the women because I was quite young. So I suppose seeing groups of women working. No I don't think I was shocked really, it just gives you lots of experiences and narratives.

How did the other women take it. Were they laughing?

Yes, yes. I can see this woman saying this now. I wonder what happened to her. They all lived quite locally

30.00 How did the men treat you? You told me about the packer who had a pash for your friend. Was there any harassment going on?

Well there was one man who was the packer and like the supervisor and then the other men then were the bosses. It was all women.

But were you aware of any harassment from either the packer or the bosses?

I think there was. Certainly if I speak to Susan I think there was definitely harassment. I know he did ask her out. He wanted her. She was a very good looking girl, Susan. He obviously targeted her. She was very mature looking. We walked in together. He obviously made his mind up then, that he wanted her working with him. She had to work with him on her own. I don't think it was anything horrible but I know at the end he did ask her out. He did have intentions. I suppose you could call it a bit of harassment.

Any physical ways do you think?

I don't know. I'm not sure really. I can't remember. He may have been arms around, a bit close. I don't think it was anything worse than that. Not with me, no. He didn't fancy me, but the bosses, I know the son of these two Germans. He was quite nice looking, he was alright. I think in fact the women used to perhaps tease him a little bit. The main men, one could be quite nasty. They could come up and shout at the women if they were doing something wrong or talking. It wasn't very nice really. You mightn't get away with that now.

You thought the women were harassing this lad as well.

Well he wasn't a lad. He was probably early twenties. He was one of the bosses sons. He wasn't there all the time, but I think there was a bit of banter going on there. I think the probably quite liked him as well. I remember he was quite nice looking and so there was some kind of banter there.

Were there any perks or unofficial perks from working in the factory?

I think in the roller blind factory I think you could have a deal on roller blinds, if you wanted them. That was the in thing at the time. Probably not in Gainsborough Flowers. You may have taken home a couple of flowers now and again. Plastic flowers, no they were material flowers actually. They weren't as nice as the ones you see now.

Were you aware of any rules and regulations in these places and were they broken?

I think in Gainsborough, because the bosses could be a bit nasty I think we always used to try to get around the boss. He was quite nasty, well not all the time. He would come up to some women and you'd hear him shouting at some poor woman. Did he ever do that to me? It might have been a couple of gruff comments but nothing too much. I might have said something to him actually. There you are. He seemed to pick on some of the women if they were talking. No I can't think of any particular rules or anything.

Were you aware of health and safety at the time?

I think I might have been. God know what was happening there. I'm sure there were lots of health and safety problems.

The candles?

I'm sure they were candles. A gas light or something. I don't know what it was, but it was some sort of open flame which was attached under the machine. It was covered over but it was either gas or oil

A gas machine

34.37 Yes lit by gas. It wouldn't be allowed now. But the machine was really old, it could have been out of the last century. The nineteenth century. You know the old fashioned sewing machines; you know the legs of the sewing machine. Iron machines, like that they were. With this press on it, very old fashioned.

Do you know what happened to Gainsborough Flowers?

Well I know they moved from Pontypridd up to Porth, but I don't know what happened then. Presumably it just closed. You don't see them, they usually do these things abroad now don't they?

The sweat shops there.

It was a sweat shop I think really.

Did you join in any social events when you were there?

No I don't think I did. Did I go out with anybody socially? I don't think I did, but there were a couple of younger people. No I don't think I did actually.

What was the general age of the workforce? Were they

I was probably one of the youngest ones, a couple of full-timers, older than me were there permanently. But then a lot of them were married women. At the time they were older, but they might have been in their thirties or something. Possibly they might have had children. I don't know. It was a mixture.

Were they returners, do you think?

Well I know the one who was the supervisor didn't have children. The one I told you about the story. She didn't have children, whether she had any afterwards, I don't know. I know one women who occasionally I passed her, she'd be a grandmother by now. She was a very attractive woman, I remember that. She was quite nice and she had children but whether she did then. They would have been quite young children. Yes they probably would have been. A mixture of ages really, but they were all local women. They would be as we see now, they wouldn't be eastern Europe or anything. They were all local women then. Rhondda people.

Did you enjoy working in the factory?

Yes, in a funny sort of way I did. In my head I sort of ticked it off as money and this is a good experience. I knew because I wasn't going to stay for ever it was just one of those things to do really. I mean if I had been terribly unhappy I wouldn't have gone on in. My mother wasn't that bad. She would have complained a bit but she. If I had said, 'I really hate it here.' She wouldn't have been like that. Obviously I stuck with it really.

Would you have like to have stayed?

No, no. It was never an option really. In my head I was going to do my A levels, going to university and do something else. It never crossed my mind that this would be my life, so no.

Were you glad of that?

Oh yes, yes. I didn't even think about it in those terms. I knew it was something I was passing through doing, so no.

Did you learn anything about life and society?

Oh yes. I think about me as a politician I always stood up against bullies, always. I would be assertive if it were for me, but certainly if it was for other people. I hate seeing anybody bullied or intimidated. That would be the first thing I would do, wade in there sorting it out. I suppose my chapel upbringing as well. I hate bullying and the group mentality and I think of occasions when I really had to, gone into the middle of things and tried to protect people and in a way. It was never that bad, you notice people looking a bit humiliated and I was there when they were humiliated and picked upon and they had to pretend it didn't matter. I think I learnt a lot about that really, so I've always been very, very stern on that sort of behaviour.

What about the way the women were treated by the bosses and the management?

I thought that was awful. At the time I might have thought that this is a terrible way to go. I've been interested in women's issues and the way men and women engage. Yes I think that was an early feminist lesson really. Empowerment or lack of empowerment for women. It was clear, quite clear visually. But on the other hand you would see how some of the women would try and get back. There were jokes going on with this man and the one in the packing. There was quite a flirtation going on quite often. I think we quite enjoyed that, it wasn't just one way. He was rather like the rooster in the farmyard. That was almost the impression you get really. From memory he was quite a nice looking bloke. He thought he was somebody really.

You went to a girls' school, a grammar school, so was it you seeing the outside world for the first time, going to the factory? Do you think you were quite sheltered before?

In some ways, because I was an only child, no brothers and sisters and going to a girls' school, yes I must admit I loved my school. I'm still very friendly with the girls I went to Ponty with and we meet every month. We're knocking on sixty now but we're still girls. My time in school was wonderful, I mean I've got issues about girls' schools but you do get a lot of confidence from that. Camaraderie etc, but in some ways I was a bit sheltered in that I didn't have any brothers or sisters. On the other hand I had worked in Woolworth's which was sort of a similar thing. I was very sociable. I used to be a bit shy when I was younger, perhaps I was a bit then but I think working there was brilliant experience really. I'm really glad I did it, because I think some children now because they've been in education they are quite sheltered. It's a shame because I think its good experience to do all this part-time work. My mother was brilliant at it really. She was wonderful to support me, get me these opportunities really.

So last question then. In a nutshell how would you sum up?

Brilliant. I wouldn't have missed it for the world. It wasn't money at the time but it was the story I remember. It has been quite influential on my growing up and my career and probably when I've done talks to people I've mentioned things about it. I'm quite proud of the fact that I certainly, as a politician when people tend to say, 'Oh you don't know what

the real world is about.' That was the real world really. Rhondda of the nineteen seventies, it was an interesting time really. Yes, I wouldn't have missed it for the world. My own daughter, she didn't do factory work. She's grown up now but I would have liked her to have done factory work. She's done lots of work experience but I think it would have been great for anybody to have tried that. It gives you the skills

When did you decide to become a politician?

I left university in seventy-eight. No job, but I did get a job in about eight weeks but I joined the Labour Party in seventy-nine. This is when Thatcher got in. Of course that was the start of my political career. I wasn't political until then. My father had been a trade unionist. But I think I was very active in the Labour Party in nineteen seventy nine. Eventually then through that I decided to stand for council in ninety-one and I didn't get in. Then I stood for council again in ninety-five. Why I became a politician was because I felt I wanted to make a difference. I think partly, this is my feminism again, I remember seeing when I worked as a careers advisor, this cocky councillor coming in. He was so arrogant. He was really talking down to me. 'I said, 'Who's that?' And they said, 'Don't say anything to him, he's a councillor.' I said, 'What!.' I got so angry that people like him were representing us. In the back of my mind I said, 'I'm going to do this. I'm not having him representing me.' It was partly anger on my part, so that's why I got involved in politics.

44.37

END OF INTERVIEW/ DIWEDD CYFWELIAD