

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI

Louis Edwards, Maesteg; George Webb, Bridgend; Revlon, Maesteg

Interviewee: VSE068

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Interviewer: Beth Jenkins on behalf of the Women's Archive of Wales / Archif
Menywod Cymru

The speaker was born in Maesteg in 1949. Her mother came from a large family. When she was fifteen, she started working at Louis Edwards, a sewing factory in Maesteg which made ladies clothes for Marks and Spencers. She was dyslexic; they found that she had lots of skills but didn't like the written word.

1.27:

She said:

In school at 7 year old, Mr Morgan told me I was a 'twp' and I thought I would never learn to read and write. So I never tried. So when I went to Louis Edwards for a test, I failed the test, and Louis Edwards was taking on anybody...And I went back to the school after my interview, crying. And Miss Walden phoned the school, she said, 'take her back again and sit her on a sewing machine'. And every test they gave me on the sewing machine – threading a bobbin, putting a needle in, whatever – I did in the fastest time, but I couldn't read the paper that asked you the questions.

She started working there then after the school holidays in September at fifteen.

Work started about 7.30am and was about a six minute walk away. She undertook training for twelve weeks and was then put on collars and cuffs, the top job.

The speaker married in 1968, whilst she was working at Louis Edwards. Her husband was in the colliery earning 15 shillings a week, and after his training about £10 a week. She was earning double that on the sewing machine.

She left work after her first baby, who died two days after birth. She then went back to Louis Edwards for six months. She had another daughter, knowing the factory would employ her again.

She said:

It was one of those factories where if you didn't know anything, they'd teach you. It was really lovely Louis Edwards. And the girls that we worked with, we're still friends today.

She went back to work until the birth of her second daughter. Her daughter died, so she decided to give up work to concentrate on having a baby.

She had three sons. In between each she would keep elderly people company.

She then decided to go to George Webb's, a shoe factory. However, she hated it because it was completely different type of sewing to Louis Edwards.

She then decided to pursue nursing, which she did for about ten years. By this time she had grandchildren.

She said:

Louis Edwards has taught me a lot, because I've never stopped sewing.

The speaker talks about her childhood when her mother was also dyslexic and would sew in exchange for food or coal. Her father worked in the colliery. She talks about the close-knit nature of the community she grew up in.

It was common for girls to go to the factories after school. She talks about the friendship between her colleagues.

6.41:

She said:

If someone was upset in one of the factories...we were all in line over the factory yard there and if somebody done something against you, especially in management – if your pay wasn't right or someone didn't give you a day off which they'd promised you for a funeral or something - it was so funny - everybody out. And we'd all go sit in the road in the front of the factory and you would stick together, that person would get their share of what they needed. It was unbelievable times, you look back...If it was birthdays you'd have a hat or a box going round, collecting for somebody for birthday, you know, we all cared for each other.

Her brother worked in the cutting room. Men also worked in the factory and had a hard job.

The workers used to be able to buy the reject dresses that Marks and Spencers didn't want for a pound. If somebody was going to a wedding they'd all go into work on a Saturday to make a dress.

Louis Edwards was a strict employer. Mr Wilson would time them and check the standard of the stitching. They had a basic wage of around £2/£3 a week, which they were able to top-up in relation to the amount of collars/cuffs produced. It didn't matter that She couldn't read or write because her friend would hand her tickets in for her.

There was very little maternity leave – nothing more than a month or so.

When she was expecting her third child she went back to work. Adie Elliot, the boss, was her mother's cousin and persuaded her to go back if she gave her easy jobs to do. Her colleagues collected a layette of items for her baby, everything in white.

She is still friendly with the people she worked with in Louis Edwards. They meet for lunch once a month in a pub in town.

When they used to work, the girls would organise an outing to Weston-Super-Mare. They'd save a shilling a week to go. They would borrow each other's' clothes.

15.20:

She said:

Then we'd go to our annual do and how many of us would turn up in the same style dress because we'd have our own patterns, and then the material from Louis Edwards – whether you'd bought it or not. [Laughs] And you'd see this row of flower dresses – different colours – and we'd all laugh because we knew what we'd done. And the bosses put up with us, you know. You wouldn't get a load of girls like us, because we just stuck together.

The speaker got on well with her bosses until it was price time. Her two supervisors were good at giving orders but not so good at sewing themselves.

She said:

If you wanted to earn money in between your job – we were on a line we were, and we were always waiting for the over lockers because every job had to be over locked – so as the work is going down the line, say the girl making tabs had run behind or maybe she hadn't been well, so I'd say 'fetch me ten packs of them down'. Or the girls making cuffs and I'd say 'can I have two packs of them'. So I was having extra work when I waited for my work. So I could always double my pay every week. Like darting – you'd run 500 darts through a machine. But if you made a mistake, you'd be at work at half past six in the morning to unpick your mistake. Well, you had to earn your money, but it was good.

She describes a usual working day: they would start work at half past seven, then they'd have a break about ten, they'd stop for lunch about half past twelve, they would then go back to the machines at about quarter past one and finish work about half past four.

There was a canteen in the factory where they could buy their lunch. Her favourite food to have was always a giant piece of toast with a wedge of cheese.

18.01:

She said:

Friday was fish and chips, and we'd do no work after. We'd send somebody that was not having dinner out for bags of sweets – we'd give her a list of what sweets we liked – and the bags would be going up and down the line all afternoon. We wouldn't do any work, but see you'd earned it through the week and you kept your tickets back. So if you knew you were going to do nothing Friday, and perhaps you'd earned the day before three times your money, you'd take a third of it or keep it for Friday. Because they wouldn't count the tickets coming off the line every day, but Joan Jones would count it at the beginning of the week. So our tickets had to go in every morning for our pay for the following week.

They were paid a week advance. They had some form of sick pay but it wasn't very good. She talks about everyone 'sticking together'.

She said:

Whatever we were doing, we made sure everybody had a wage. And you done it without thinking about it. Looking back you can see it, but at the time you didn't – it was the norm. So if someone was crying and out the toilet, you'd have about twenty girls up the toilet seeing why she was crying. You know - 'Adie had done it again', or 'Wilson had done it again', so 'shall we go on strike?!', 'shall we go outside?' And I used to be begging no, 'cause I was saving for a house.

It was quite common for the workers to go on strike and they were usually successful.

She said that the owner of the factory was lovely. She then talks about how the workers suspected that one of the supervisors was having an affair with him, which they found amusing.

Her mother also worked at the factory, and had worked in factories since the Second World War.

20.35:

She said:

We only had the factories, us women. You know, 'cause you didn't want to go to shops, 'cause shops was boring...there was nothing pretty about the shop work. But you had a laugh in the factory. Monday morning was a dread, but Friday afternoon you didn't care a hoot.

The speaker only worked at George Webb's for six weeks and felt that she didn't get in with the girls. She found the work, making brogues, very boring. She preferred her time at Louis Edwards.

She said:

I've tried everything really. I worked at Revlon, I've worked in Chanel, but always in between my babies, you know. 'Cause Revlon used to be good, they'd take people on for three months and didn't want to keep them unless they were really, really good. So, in between my babies I'd go over there for three months.

I did it a few times. But you could get work in them days. If you had any small skill you could get one.

In Louis Edwards their holidays usually consisted of trips to Porthcawl or Barry.

The furthest people would travel to work in Maesteg would be from Cymmer, with others travelling from Aberkenfig or Sarn.

She would walk to work, but she's also had a moped and a push bike.

She then talks about health and safety regulations. There was a nurse based in the factory. It was common for the needle from the sewing machine to go into people's nails.

25.01:

She said:

So you'd go to the nurse then, take the needle out and back to work. There was no messing about. Because if you went home there was no pay.

She recalled that the male and female workers kept themselves to themselves. They were friendly, but most of the men were married.

She said:

Looking back it was the best job I've ever had. I loved the nursing in Bridgend hospital, because I was on a geriatric ward and I never experienced our grandparents. That's why I try and be a good grandparent myself, because it must have been lovely to have a grandparent. Looking after them old people, the stories they would tell me about when they went out to work, you know, they had it tough. I think my generation was the best, because we didn't have it tough really. We had enough, you know. But I wouldn't like to be now today. I think these kids got it hard.

She talks about her mother being ill and being one of the first patients at Maesteg Hospital.

The speaker eventually left Louis Edwards and took up nursing.

35:31

DIWEDD CYFWELIAD/ END OF INTERVIEW