

## **VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/ LLEISIAU O LAWR Y FFATRI**

### **Glass factory – East Moors, Cardiff**

**Interviewee:** VSE070 Michele Ryan

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**Interviewer:** Catrin Edwards for Woman's Archive of Wales / ar ran  
Archif Menywod Cymru

The interviewee identified herself as Michele Ryan, date of birth 16.11.1949.

Michele grew up in a Catholic family; her father was from Cardiff, and her grandfather worked on the trolley lines. She has a photograph of her grandfather in his greatcoat inspecting the last line coming up Whitchurch Road, near Gabalfa. Her grandmother was from Pembrokeshire, and her great-grandfather ran the Liberal Club in Pembroke Dock. Her mother is from Salford. When her parents married they moved to Cardiff, so Michele was born in St David's hospital. The family moved to Pembroke Dock, where her father was doing 'whatever work he could really', and then they moved to Wallisea(?) opposite Liverpool, then they moved back to Cardiff and lived in Splott. Michele's father managed to move the family into Council accommodation following concerns about living in un-sanitary conditions in Splott. The family moved to Tonyrhwyn(?) in Birchgrove. When the family lived in Splott, Michele's father was selling ice cream with El Dorado(?), then selling Smiths watches, he worked for Julian Hodge, then worked as a private detective, known as 'Dick Ryan, Private Eye'. Michele's Dad knew everyone in Cardiff, 'from high to low'. Then he ran the Catholic Housing Association until he died. Michele's mother was a high speed typist. When she went back to work after having five children, she worked as a secretary in the Social Science department at Cardiff University until she retired. So gradually, Michele's father earned more money and they moved from Splott to a Council estate to a semi in the Heath. Her parents stayed there until Michele left to go to Bradford University While Michele was in Cardiff in the sixth form, Michele worked in Windsor Place 'up in the attic of one of those big Victorian houses, filing dusty files hour after hour'. She also worked in Littlewoods cafe. When Michele went to University, because she was the eldest of 5 children, her parents couldn't afford to give her any support at all ('understandably') as Michele's youngest sister was only 10 when she left Cardiff. When Michele returned the first job she got was with a window manufacturer.

*Before we go there, tell me..... how many brothers and sisters have you got?*

There's me, then a brother, who's now an industrial designer, and lives in Seattle; then my sister, who teaches at the Open University and lives in Cardiff; then a brother who's an architect who lives in Bristol, and then my younger sister who is self employed but thinking of doing an MA in Social Science research or something.

*(04.57) So where did you go to school?*

I got through the eleven plus, so....

*Where was the Primary school first, or were you moving around?*

Yes, I was at St Peters at St Albans, then St Josephs in Whitchurch Road, and from St Josephs I went to Heathfield House High School for Girls, so that was the Catholic grammar school at the time, it then became a convent school. I'm not sure what it is now, but it's on Richmond Road, opposite the mansion house. It felt really big at the time, but when I drive past it now it's so small and compact! But it just felt gigantic and the head nuns.... there were two nuns who sort of ran the school ....with an iron rod! Sister Anthony, and I can't remember the other one. Nearly all women teachers except for the music teacher, he was a man. So I did my O levels and A levels there.

*So you went to Bradford?*

Yes.

*And then, you're talking then ....I know you worked in Julian Hodge....but the first factory job...was that in the first holiday?*

Yes.

*The first summer holiday?*

No it was the winter.

*(06.13) Oh right, oh tell me about it then.*

It was cold! And this was like ....um....I'm sure if you looked at the drama series on TV at the moment about The Mill, it looked like that. It looked like an abandoned shed. Brick shed, lots of windows all round it, quite a lot of them broken, even though it was a glass window making factory. Huge place where all the sheets of glass were lined up, and then at the back there was a cafe. A canteen which was the place where everyone would gather for their tea and their lunch and a chat.....and I don't think I ever moved the huge plates of glass, but we all had gloves for carrying sheets of glass around the factory , moving them from one place to another where they were going to be cut....finished , whatever.

*What was it like the first day? Describe the place and the canteen. The first day you walked in there what was it like?*

Well...it was quite scary actually, because, you know, I had been working for a couple of years on and off, but nothing like that. Although I think I was becoming quite political, so I think

there was a part of me thinking, ' Yes, I need to know what it feels like to be part of the working class and doing a hard job' ....and also there were a lot of women employed, so ...but I remember being really quite scared, but in those days I think they always made sure there was somebody looking out for you. So there'd be ....one of the women took me under her wing and showed me the ropes.

*Do you remember how you got the job?*

No I don't actually. Very likely it was my Dad thinking I needed to get a sense of the real world.

*Do you remember if you had an interview, or some kind of interview for it?*

(8.47)I think I probably....I remember going into an office, so that must have been say the week before, or a couple of days before. I must have had some idea about it being better paid than working in Littlewoods cafe. So there would be shifts but the money was better.

*Did you know anybody who worked there?*

No.

*So when you went there were you the only student there?*

Yes, as far as I knew. There might have been some male students but we didn't really mix that much, because I felt quite safe with the women. The women seemed to have a way of managing that place, well, they did have quite a few ways of managing that place! Particularly managing men which I thought was really interesting. I was thinking about it recently, you know, the way a lot of men might disregard women these days - at least if you listen to stuff on the internet and Twitter- it was absolutely the women who managed these men. Initiated them into how to behave and who was really in charge! And it was the women.

*Do you remember how many people worked there, and what was the ratio, say, of men to women?*

I think it was probably about 30% women, and about..... going on for 100 people, maybe more.

*So it's quite substantial then, it wasn't a small place?*

No

*And did you say about 30% women?*

Yes, somewhere between 30% and 40%. Obviously some of those women would be working in the canteen some would be working in the office and then some of us were on the floor.

*Right. Were you trained at all?*

No! It was just about moving glass around.

*Ok..... well take me through a days work then.*

Early shifts. Turn up, clock on go into the canteen, have a cuppa or something. Have a chat and then you would be in some area. So I must have been with, you know somebody who was organising what had to be moved that day. Basically, it would just be about moving stuff around. Mainly glass, and then breaks. I mean the breaks were quite regular. Sometimes quite heavy stuff. I remember I mean at 18 you're quite fit aren't you and I know before I left school was fencing, so I think I was reasonably fit. But I don't remember anything other than just these big gloves and carrying glass around.

*(11.56) Were you given.... you say you had big gloves.....were you given any other protective clothing?*

I don't remember.

*What about your feet?*

No.

*Was there broken glass on the floor and things like that?*

I think people....there was somebody clearing the floor most of the time. I have a vague memory it was a bloke, but I might have been wrong, you know that just ....I mean there was no accidents when I was there so I think their regard for health and safety- at least safety- was in place, and you did as you were told. Every now and again somebody from the office would come down and parade through the factory and that was about the only time we saw them.

*So you say you worked shifts, did you? Do you remember what the shifts were?*

No not really. I think I generally did an early shift. I was trying to think.... how did I get there? I suppose I must have got the bus, and then walked.

*And where were you travelling from in those days?*

Heath.

*And where was the factory?*

I've a feeling it was ...um....it was Trade Street somewhere round there, or East Moors. In that area because there was a lot of industrial plant building there. It's like you drive around Cardiff now and it's so difficult to remember because Cardiff in the 1960s was still like an industrial town in lots of ways, certainly that area. Timber works, steel works, glass works...um tobacco factories. I mean you didn't feel that it was an administrative centre it was only in the late 60s that you began to feel that Cardiff was becoming an administrative centre for the principality so it still felt very ....not totally industrial, but there was still a lot of manufacturing, and in that area as well.

*(14.21) So you say an early shift, what time do you think that was...early?*

I think I was there for 8, so not that early.

*So did you have a bus journey? Two buses do you think?*

Yes, unless my Dad took me in. He might have driven me in, but it would have been one bus and probably a walk.

*Right. So you think you had a break in the morning then?*

Yes, there was always a tea break, and a lunch break, then a tea break in the afternoon.

*Have you any idea when you finished?*

I presume it was around about 4. The only strong memory I have is the camaraderie among the women. They were Bolshie, always having a laugh. A bit raucous sometimes, you know. They tried to get fun out of it 'cos it wasn't an easy place to be. But I remember one young bloke starting on the line, whatever, and there was one big central track though the factory floor, and they said 'Oh you've got to be introduced to everybody, so we'll line up and you can just go through the line'. He was mortified, he was really shy. He really didn't want to go through it. It's alright, we're all going to introduce ourselves, of course, as he went through the women, every single one of them, either pinched his bum or made some comment about his body, grabbed his balls! I mean there was a real initiation, and that was a really good way of managing because in those days obviously women were seen much more as....they were less paid than the men etc etc.

(16.44) It was a really good way of making sure that nobody messed with them. And the blokes didn't mess with them because they had a way of managing them and that stuck in my mind. How women could organise men so that they weren't messed about by them. In fact, on the whole, were treated with respect.

*Would you say the men were frightened of them even?*

Some of them, yes. Certainly the younger ones!

*So these women ...describe them to me. How old were they ... were they married...?*

I think most of them were around about in their 30s married, kids. A few older women. But I remember just feeling it must be really tough for them, but probably this was the best job they could get.

*Was the work hard then?*

A lot of lifting. I presume as you got older, you had a lighter job. I think there was some kind of commitment to the employees in the sense of ...they didn't get rid of them just because they no longer functioned at the same kind of level. There was some attempt to treat them properly, and I think there was a union involved as well.

*Can you remember what the union was?*

No.

*Were you a member?*

No I was a student and I knew I was doing different jobs every break.

*Were the men and the women doing the same job?*

No the men did most of the cutting, so women were doing quite a lot of the lifting. Not all of the lifting, the bigger ones....and finishing. I don't quite know what all that meant, but finishing and working on the smaller benches, presumably on smaller pieces. Whereas the men did the big ones.

*Why do you think the men did the cutting?*

(18.53)

'Cos of the big machines, and in those days, women weren't allowed on the machines were they, cos you got more money.

*Were you aware of ....because this would have been about 1967?*

1969/70.

*69/70.....So you were aware then that the women weren't getting as much money as the men?*

Well, because the women's' movement hit Bradford in 69, so certainly I was involved in left wing politics, and with the women's movement, and in Bradford there was a television factory called Bairds, which made TV parts and nearly all women. Small parts..... assembly lines. I used to sell Women's Voice and Socialist Worker outside Bairds factory, 6am. So I think that was partly what influenced me...maybe I looked for the job in Cardiff when I went back to get the sense of what it was like to be that side. In fact, some of the women in Bairds joined the women's group in Bradford, and it caused ructions at the time with their husbands and stuff....families. So I think that certainly that's what I was carrying when I came back to Cardiff.

*(20.39) Were the women aware that they weren't getting enough pay?*

Yes, but there was a kind of acceptance in those days that ....there was still some of that residue of post war...you know, they'd come back they needed their pride, they needed their sense of being the bread winner....the head of the household. They needed that and therefore an awful lot of women saw it as pin money, you know they were just helping out. My mum always thought that, you know, that my Dad....a lot of pride in the fact that the husband was going to be the head of the household, and a wife could only help out....and certainly I know my mother's generation, you know, 'cos it was .....both my parents....My Dad would have gone into law if the war hadn't happened...and my mum would have been a career woman and she would have gone to university. Both of them felt frustrated at that, and for quite a few years after the war, it was very tough for my Dad trying to find work. He was always a travelling sales man wherever he went. He was often not at home you know, that didn't please my mum a lots 'cos she was left at home with the kids. So I think there was a lot of investment in keeping men's pride going, or value going. A lot of the women felt like that. I know that with the women in the Bairds factory in Bradford, there was a real sense that they'd betrayed not only men, but women as well, by refusing to fit in any more.

*(22.28) You say there was a union in the factory, were you aware of any disputes when you worked there?*

No I think there was....I can't remember now. I would imagine there was always some dispute around over-time, you know, and who got that. There were always discussions in the canteen about conditions....certainly, I remember conditions 'cos I remember it being really cold, and really hard being in a place like that. It wasn't, like, a clean factory. So there was quite a lot of talk around that. A kind of ...Well, you that's what it's like.

*Was there any heating there at all?*

There probably were some, but it was a big factory and a lot of the windows were broken.

*What about lighting was that an issue or was that ok?*

I think that must have been ok. I remember it as quite dark, but it must have been quite light, 'cos you're working with glass, you know you'd have to have the right kind of lighting, but the image I still hold is of a dark Victorian shed.

*Do you think ....I know you say there were no big accidents when you were there....but do you think the work was dangerous?*

Yes, I mean, I know there had been accidents- people being cut and hurting themselves, but I don't remember anything else.

*Was the work skilled or ....was it, know, were there skilled jobs or were there un-skilled jobs?*

I think there must have been both because I'm assuming because some of the sheets of glass were big. I've tried to find out whether it was John Williams, or whether it was another glass making factory, but there's a company called Ashford stained glass windows in Cardiff and they've been going since the 19th century, early 20th century. Now they do stained glass windows, special windows, different sized windows, so I'm assuming that these huge sheets of glass were cut down and then cut into different shapes and sizes, so the more intricate the cutting, the more that would be machine tooling. Whereas, the big ones would just be sort of almost sending them in and being sliced, like you do with logs. But then the more intricate work would be on machines.

*(25.37) What did the women with children do? Were you aware of how they managed child care and that kind of thing?*

Either the kids were at school....so they were on shifts....or they were doing, I don't know whether they worked at night shift. But most of them came from families where they had mums around, so there was somebody who could keep an eye on the kids until they finished their shift.

*So there were night shifts as well were there?*

I think so. I don't know about that. I don't know if any of the women worked the night shift....I would doubt it. But there might have been a few, because some women liked the night shift. Well, some women with families really liked working night shifts 'cos they had their husband's at home to look after the kids.

*So was it open all day and night then, or just a few shifts?*

I can't remember.

*Did you ever have to work weekends?*

Probably not. I can't remember.

*Were you given overtime?*

No I was quite happy!

*How many hours were they?*

I think it was about 8 hours a day.

*Do you remember how much you were paid a week?*

No idea, but obviously more than I would have got in Littlewoods cafe or filing.

*What did you spend your money on?*

Well, clothes, I mean, in those days you had a grant, but it was only a basic grant. So for clothes and books....I'm not aware of really going away and having expensive holidays, or even travelling abroad while I was at university , so it was more putting a bit in the bank, so ....for rent and stuff , and clothes and books and music.

*Did you have to give any money to your parents?*

No.

*So it was really to subsidise your university lifestyle.*

'Cos technically, my Dad was supposed to subsidise me. The understanding was ....because in terms of his income, if they compared the income to the maintenance grant, he was supposed to top it up. So I didn't get the full grant because he was on a higher income. But because he had 4 kids at home, there was no way he could afford to. Every now and again he might give me a little bit, so I had to supplement the supplement that he couldn't pay me.

*Yes. Did you have to - I know I asked you about protective clothing-did you have to wear a uniform at all? Any kind of overall?*

I think I might have had some kind of overall to protect the clothes.

*Did they provide it?*

Yes.

*( 29.15) Ok. Were you ever , you said the health and safety was quite good there?*

I think so, yes.

*Were you made aware of health and safety?*



Yes, there were certain places you had to walk clearly. You couldn't just cross across things. You had to follow the walkways. You had to wear your gloves and stuff. I think most people were quite conscious of - it's glass, you know. And it was.....and glass is heavy. You don't realise, because it's transparent how heavy it is. But it is really heavy. So, you drop one of those, and I mean the odd drop would happen and create a big crash. But generally people were really careful. I don't know if they got docked their wages if they dropped a sheet of glass....

*( 30.18) I was going to ask what happened if you dropped a sheet! What about the other facilities, like toilets, women's toilets, that kind of thing. What were the facilities like?*

Crude. There was a toilet for women, there was a wash basin, but nothing fancy. I mean....I think in those day work places, remembering the work places I went into in Bradford, they were very very crude. Unusually unionised, but no nice wash basins and proper toilets and stuff.

*Were people allowed to smoke on the factory floor?*

I doubt it. I don't remember, 'cos I smoked by then, but I don't remember smoking on the factory floor, because I can't see how that would be allowed. We probably could smoke in the canteen.

*Is that where you smoked, in the canteen?*

Yes. Or if you had a break, you might go outside depending on the weather.

*The toilets as well?*

You didn't need to smoke in the toilets.

*No, because there were other places to smoke. Was it very noisy on the factory floor?*

Yes, there was lots of drilling and grinding and sawing ....so it was very noisy. I think there was music while you work going as well. Then there'd be odd shouting across things.

*Did people sing along with music?*

Yes, sometimes, yes. But not like, you know, 'cos obviously if you're on an assembly line or whatever, you're all in rhythm aren't you.

*You can do the moves as well!*

Yes, well we were more scattered than working in one place.

*Were people allowed to chat and things?*

Up to a point, but not a lot unless you were doing something in a particular corner, then you were moving stuff so other than the canteen ....there weren't many places where you could just sort of huddle and chat.

*( 32.53) How long did you work there for?*

A few weeks.

*Did you go back afterwards?*

No! Once I'd done it, I was absolutely sure 'I've done that'! Really admired people doing it week in week out but I was totally relieved not to have done it again.

*How were you treated because you were a student?*

Alright actually. I don't know whether it's because of my politics and everything. I could talk the union talk, or whatever. I seemed to be accepted but I got quite a bit of teasing 'cos I was just in for a short time and then would leave. So I wasn't going to be part of them. But they were very generous towards me.

*(33.53) Do you think it helped that maybe you were the only one?*

I think so. I think they also recognised that I was doing it because of some kind of commitment to it as opposed to 'Oh God, you know'. I think there was some kind of recognition that I was on their side even if I did seem and look like a middle class under-grad. But I suppose because I was in Bradford as well, I could certainly talk the talk.

*How did the women ....how do you think they viewed the work?*

As hard. Hard, tough work. But the best that they could get at the time. They couldn't get anything else.

*Were you aware of how long they would stay there?*

Some of them had been there for quite a while. So there was that old ...not, I don't know about loyalty. Maybe it was loyalty, not sure. But that sense of a kind of patriarchal being taken care of. Whoever the boss was, had some idea of who you were and there was some...um....I'd hesitate to say being taken care of or anything, but some sense of belonging.

*How do you think they were treated by the management and the bosses? Were they treated well, or not?*

(35.43) I don't know I don't remember them being treated badly. I think they were just disregarded a lot of the time. But every now and again they kind of (unclear) patriarchal bonhomie might surface, and there'd be some kind of link - he'd remember their name or something, you know. So there was some sort of connection that's what I mean about the belonging thing. It was.....they weren't completely unknown.

*You were there I presume over Christmas, were you?*

I think it was either Christmas or Easter. I remember it being really cold, so it had to be Christmas or Easter. It certainly wasn't the summer.

*(36.38) you weren't aware of any Christmas do's or parties were you?*

No. I don't remember.

*Did you socialise at all with the workers?*

No. Not out of shift, you know, I didn't meet up with them after work.

*Down the (unclear?) for a drink?*

No! To be honest I think when I came and I often didn't come, because after that I started in a lot of drama so virtually every holiday I was acting in something or other.....so I don't remember coming home that often and if I did come home it would only be for a short space of time. So I was either working in Bradford, or acting. So that kind of work stopped in terms of coming home and needing to earn something.

*Did you ever go and work in another factory? Did you work in a factory in Bradford?*

No.

*Did you enjoy working at the factory at all or did you ...you know, how did you find it?*

I found it really hard.....and didn't want to be doing it, but, you know, did it. Enjoyed being with the women a lot. Sitting around having the moans , you know I remember stuff about clocking in, clocking off was always a bit of a moan in terms of how quickly you could get done if you turned up late and all that kind of thing.

*What did they used to do if you turned up late?*

I think you got your wages docked, so they were tight about that. But I liked being with the women. I just ....I enjoyed working.....being with them...and I like that. The sort of generosity. You know, bitchiness as well, but generosity, which I think has gone through, you know, working at Bairds and then working in the valleys with the women's support groups. That kind of ....the fun....and the ease of being with the women and their acceptance.

*So did you keep in touch with any of them?*

No.

*Did you work at Bairds then?*

No I just sold the 'Women's Voice' outside Bairds.

*Looking back, what do you think you got out of working...or how do you feel about working for that very short time you worked in the factory?*

Well, there was quite ....in those days at university, particularly in Bradford, you would never have wanted to admit that you were middle class. The whole thing was about being working class, or from a working class background. Well in Bradford actually that was the majority of people, because it was a college of advanced technology and had only recently been made into a university. So lots of engineers, lots of textile work, you know, it was....So lots of people who had come through were from working class backgrounds. But also politically, you didn't own your middle class status or whatever. And because we'd come much more through that working class route, that was something that I wanted ...and I still do....I would still say that in my head, I am from those working class roots, and the generosity, the collectivity the supporting each other even in really tough working conditions. The kind of putting up with it, but soldiering on and the collective values. And also the pride in doing it in order to support your family, you know, all of that kind of thing. I still really admire, and it's still part of that sort of working class.

(41.20) What it didn't have, which I knew in other contexts might have been is, you know, this idea like in Bradford, some of the people working in the mills were highly politicised. A lot of the Indians had been brought over to work in the mills and they were ...they'd come as groups because they were in the Communist party. At the time they didn't know when they were recruiting them, that all these men that came over, were all part of the Communist party, you know. So they were very politicised. So I think I was hoping there would have been a bit more political nous, but there wasn't in the glass factory particularly.

*Thank you very much.*

42:11

END OF INTERVIEW/DIWEDD CYFWELIAD