

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/ LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI

Contract work in Sidroy's Lingerie and Slumberwear, Barry (c 1964 onwards)

Interviewee: VSE081
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Interviewer: Catrin Stevens on behalf of Women's Archive of Wales

Background: The speaker is the fourth generation of a building firm, but which has finished now because he has retired. He attended Romilly schools (Barry) and went to the Secondary Modern ('being dense'). He left school to join his father's trade. He was a general builder - he built some houses and other work. He was 16 when he left school '**There was no choice, was there? I was told. In those days you were told weren't you?**'

He met his wife - the site on which his house stands today used to be the YMCA and there was big dance hall down the bottom called Bindles which was known throughout south Wales, and there was a Water's edge Hotel - this is where he met his wife. His wife became a nurse - she was going to go Guy's but she went to Llandough instead. Her father told her '**Out of school, I'm not educating you because you're going to get married and produce children. You won't work, so what's the point?**' His own father was very dictatorial and told him what to do. Things have changed.

His father was a joiner and the speaker became a joiner too - a joiner makes it, and a carpenter fixes it. Luckily he learned the range of skills within the building trade.

2.20

Then they became involved with the Sidroy factory when his father won the contract for the maintenance of the buildings and they built cutting tables and put things right generally. He worked in the factory and on top of it and around it!

What did Sidroy's produce?

‘Locally it’s called the knicker factory. ... It made ladies’ underwear, corsets, bras, and (excuse the language) knickers, slips, nighties – everything.’

... It was called Sidroy Mills. The chap who started it, he had two children, Sid and Roy, and Vanessa Feltz is a child of one of the boys. So Feltz was the actual name but it was called Sidroy Mills.

He believes there was a factory in London too – it was a big firm. The male employees were doing the maintenance mainly and fixing the machines (about 4 doing this) and there were men in the packing. Also the bosses in the front.

The rest were women – about 20-30 secretaries and 500-600 women all told – all in different compartments. The packing was primarily all men because it was lifting – the women were doing the sewing. He describes the factory – there was a big area of general sewing, at the back they had a very long cutting room. It took them about three days to lay all the tables out, put a paper towel on the top with a pattern on it, then they cut it out with these big knives. Then there was another square ‘we used to go in there but I think it was bras there’. Then at the back they had a big canteen – it was a very big area.

He was around 16-20 when he went there to work (1964-68). There is a Waitrose on the site of the old factory today. It was by the side of the railway from Barry to Cardiff.

90% of the women working in the factory were machinists of one sort or another.

6.20

So what was your relationship like between, you know - the men and the women ... were they...?

They didn’t mix that much but it was a bit - to me it was scary ... because when I was a child you had gangs of boys around, roaming around, not causing trouble, and one or two women, but here it was a gang of women who were very sure of themselves and very ...(?) It was, it was very ... I was scared, truthfully I was scared. I wasn’t scared physically, I was scared what they would do to me and what could happen. It was, .. it wasn’t normal. Put it like that. You know, and the language wasn’t normal either. The language was very – basic. Generally, they were alright, but they cut up rough.

And they were all Barry girls or..?

Yes, Barry, or Penarth, some from Cardiff, ... predominantly they were all Barry people.

There were young school-leavers at fifteen there up to retirement age. The older women were a bit more – common sense – age - mellow. **‘But there were girls there that, as I said, frightened me. I wasn’t used to it you know. I was always used to (think that a) man chases a woman, not, you know, women telling blokes what to do.’**

Can you give an example of what happened, you know, there .. How you, as young boys were treated?

He explains that they left them alone if they were in the commune (?) and everybody could see you, they just treated you, you know – the language was a bit ripe but ... **‘it was when you were by yourself, they used to de-bag you, for use of a better word. ‘**

Did they have a way of initiating young boys into the factory? ... because in some areas they did – an initiation ceremony? ...

... You just learnt ... I never really saw it but I heard a lot of stories. But they would de-bag you, chase you around in front of all the women. And they used to ... We built some tables, they were about 8 foot wide by 50-100 feet long on which they used to lay the material on to cut it and I was there working on these (we built three of them, no two of them, sorry) and I was varnishing one, and the manager said to me ‘If you want to know anything, I’ll be back in a few ...’ and he said, I forget the boy’s name – he lived over Barry Island – ‘He’s in charge, if you want to know anything, ask him.’ And the foreman / woman cutter – she asked him something and he told her to go away politely – he was in charge and she had to do what he told her, so she punched him and knocked him out! ... She was very hard. She should have been a man, if you understand. There was no mucking around. But generally it was alright – it was only if you were cocky, if you came back at them. If you behaved yourself and treated them with a certain amount of respect they were not too bad.

10.36

Were the comments they made sexual, you know?

Yes! Yes, very much so. You knew what was being said. It didn’t leave you – ‘what did that mean?’ - it was very forthright! But, I mean, if you were that way inclined, sex wise, it was there with quite a lot of them, you know. But as I said ...’

You were too young?

No, I wasn’t too young, I was just petrified. I was scared. I was saying that they ... there was one chap there who was very much into .. women, - we were cleaning all the radiators, and they were up in the roof space with the fan, and they chased him up there and left him there all day and then they wouldn’t let him down. And when they left, I went in and gave him the ladder to come down. I wouldn’t have gone in to let him down, cos they would have done the same thing to me. If they had caught him, I don’t know what they would have done because, .. you know like that thing with two well-greased nuts ..

Can you tell that story?

Well, this one boy was getting cocky, and he was only a ... he must only have been there a couple of months, and he was throwing his weight around, and .. and the forewoman sent him to the maintenance place where you get all the nuts, bolts and all the bits of pieces that they would have made, for two 'well-greased nuts'. And he screamed, went over the counter, and when he came back he was stark naked and his groin was covered in grease.

The speaker himself wasn't physically scared – but felt respect.

This happened to the lad mentioned above in the factory – there was a big area and on the side there were toilets, and there was just an area where they kept all the bits and pieces – cottons, needles, things like that. And there must have been four or five women in there. And he went over the counter with the women. **'And they de-bagged him, he had his shirt on, that's all, they'd completely stripped him bar his shirt and covered him with grease. ... They did terrible things like that.**

...And you had to watch – some of the alley ways if you got caught in there they would grasp ...

Assault was it?

Well today .. now what they call – these chaps now they're getting done for touching girls up, these girls used to touch you up.

What was the point of it?

'I don't know, I haven't got a clue. It was just .. I don't know. It's like blokes get, where there's a lot of men around, they get very verbal and pass comments, the girls seem to do it, you know. Where blokes would pass comments, I don't think they would have done the same thing to a woman, as these did to the boys, you know.

13.50

This occurred c.1960s. The speaker worked there for 10-15 years. Mr Felton was the boss and Mr Pits; Mr Felton used to go back and fore to London. He was like the big boss. You didn't see him walking around a lot. Mr Pits was the general manager.

Do you think he was aware that this was going on?

I think, I don't know. I think they did but they didn't – they turned a blind eye, but ... I'll never forget Mr Pits, he was always, I'd say, like a tailor's dummy – just got out of Burton's window. And he used to have these lovely brogues, and steel heels. And in the packing department, these blokes had put a load of packing cases, big things, and they were in there playing cards, having a tea, well instead of having a ten minutes they were having half an hour, but they were playing cards, and he came down and he ... and I don't know what they actually said, but it came out that 'You should be wearing bigger heels than that so

we can hear you.’ And he said to the bloke that was chopsy ‘Well, you go up and get your cards – you’re fired.’ He was the old type of boss. He didn’t suffer fools gladly. ... He was vicious.

The speaker worked on contract in the factory. Story about Felton (who was a real Cockney) cocking his leg on Pits – making out that he was a post or a tree and that he was going to piddle on him. ‘And I thought, you shouldn’t be doing that, especially not in front of somebody. ... Truthfully Felton was a very hard, rude man.’

He feels that women behaved as they did in Sidroy’s in big factories generally. If there were 200-300 women it tended to become a bit raucous – near the knuckle.

He feel that they worked there for the money – otherwise they wouldn’t work there. The men didn’t have the monotony, they mended the machines, they saw to things to run **‘but these girls they used to sit there, day after day after day for the money to sew knickers together.’** He describes one of the jobs – one woman had a bench and on it a metal form and her job was to put nighties over it and stamp a pedal and it would iron them with steam to take all the creases out, **‘and I used to look at her and think, I’d go bloody mad if I had to do day after day’** – (that was all) she did , she put it over, stamped on it, took it off, folded it and put it into a plastic transparent thing on the front .. and some girls that’s all they did, fold up underwear and put them in a receptacle.’

18.18

This behaviour occurred in the middle of work, but there was also a massive canteen. There were shifts – for the 500 girls. The woman in charge was a sergeant major! **‘It was very raucous in there, very loud.’ They used to go in there for their food too. ‘No, it didn’t stop – it was constant.’**

He feels he would work there again – but that kind of behaviour would not be done today. When he started working for his father he was told he would start by sweeping up and learn his trade all the way up. **‘But I was de-bagged, even myself when working for my father ...’**

What does de-bagged mean – sorry?

Take your pants off and cover you in adhesive and things like that.

This only happened to him once – it was like an initiation. Yea- de-bagged.

They wouldn’t have done it to you father, would they?

Oh Christ no! He would have been down the road.

It happened to him when he had been working there for about 3-4 weeks. ‘My father said to me “Watch your language, don’t get cocky. He didn’t tell me why. I found out.”’

Did his father know about this custom? Yes.

His great-grandfather started the building firm, when he came over to Barry Docks as a stone mason. Then his grandfather, then he took it on with his cousin and it was the kind of thing they used to do. **They used to send lads off to get sky hooks to Paul's the builders' merchant and they had to walk about half a mile to a mile to get ties for sky hooks or skirting ladders ...**

De-bagging was just something they did. They couldn't do it today. In Sidroy's it was something that happened to everybody. He thinks his father was got at when he was down in Bailey's in the war. He was called up and went down for his physical and he was told to go home and enjoy what life he had left! He was only seven stone when he got married. He lived until he was in his nineties. In Bailey's they maintained ships and he thinks that **it was done to him (de-bagging) there as well. He would have been 20-25 years old at the time. What he said is, the best way to do is "Oo, my mother can't sew, I'll take everything off and ... don't mess them up. ... But don't mess my clothes up" and that's I think what he did. ... And they just threw oily rags at him and things like that and then, that's it. And he cleaned himself and dressed. And they never did it again.**

23.11

In Bailey's – cleaning yourself wasn't difficult, but where he worked in Sidroy's it was. There were no toilets, no water, no anything like that. **'You had to walk round all day, until you went home. Then my mother said "What's all this? What have you been doing?" My father said 'Leave him alone, leave him alone.' The speaker is uncertain about whether it was an initiation ceremony**

He doesn't think there was a similar ceremony in Sidroy's for the women workers. He knew a couple of the girls, they were the same age as he was. But there was no liaising at all, **'They were there and I was here. They didn't care. They just did it. That's what frightened me. They were like men, they were – there was no stopping them. They didn't do it in front of the bosses, they did it surreptitiously.**

Again the speaker repeats that he doesn't think it was an initiation ceremony – No it was to put the men in their place. What happened to him was to make it known that they could do it and that he should toe the line. Initiation – yes that's what it is – they inducted you into it. And no, he didn't do it to anybody else either 'because I didn't like it being done to me!' And then the firm was getting smaller.

The factory closed a fair time ago, another food place took its place – then it was empty for several years before Waitrose took it over.

25.44

Do you feel that this behaviour in the factory was reflective of the permissive society of the sixties?

No, no. I suppose for my parents it was permissive, but today it's exceedingly mild. He compares it with what he sees when he goes out to the pubs – e.g. his wife and he like going to the pictures in Cardiff - 12 screens with a gambling place on one side and what used to be a discotheque for kids on the other. They saw a girl there with a boob tube and a pelmet on, she didn't have a bra on or underwear and she was paralytically drunk. She was lying on the floor and you could see everything and his wife – she's a nurse – put her in the recovery position so that she wouldn't choke and die. The bouncer said he had called the ambulance. His wife asked for a coat to cover her up. He said this happened quite regularly.

What happened in the factory was '**pretty frightening at the time. I wouldn't say it was sexual – it was more ..(you could have sex if you wanted to I suppose if you wanted it) but it was more frightening. It was what they would do to you ... if you didn't toe the line and got a little bit bumptious with them. ... But the place in general was alright I suppose.**'

This didn't occur often ' because everybody realised that there was a line, if you wanted to step over it, you could, and they would. But you didn't want to step over it.'

You could say something as you were walking away but next time they'd grab you .. 'You cocky little ...'

Interview terminated.