

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/ LLEISIAU O LAWR Y FFATRI

‘Tick Tock’ Factory – Smiths Ingersoll, Ystradgynlais (7 years), Economics Factory, Pontardawe (1- year), Berlei UK Factory, Pontardawe (10 years) and back to the Tick Tock from 1983-1999.

Interviewee: VSW030 (WISHES TO REMAIN ANONYMOUS)

Date of interview: Unknown

Interviewer: Eugena Hopkins on behalf of Women’s Archive Wales

The speaker confirmed her name and address and gave her date of birth: 16/11/1942.

She was born in Tonna Street, Pontardawe and she has a brother (3 years younger) and a sister (5 years older). She is a middle child, **‘and as a middle child always feels left out. (laughs). I had a happy childhood.’** Her father worked at the Alloy Works in Pontardawe before it closed down and moved to Margam and her mother – **‘she just stayed at home.’** She did help out in a bakers’ shop and bake bread and bring all the bread home. **‘And we had butter on Sundays – through the week it was mixed with margarine’.** They lived **‘in rooms’**, but when she was six (1948) they moved to the new council houses in Allt-y-werin. In Tonna Street they had to go down the garden to the toilet, but in Allt-y-werin they had a toilet upstairs **and** out the back! **‘We spent the first week, I think, flushing toilets’.**

She attended Pontardawe Infants which was situated then by the Police Station down School Lane. You couldn’t avoid going to the dentist because the school dentist was in the yard. From there she went up to the Girls’ School, **‘I wasn’t lucky enough to pass my eleven plus. Never mind, I went to Clydach Secondary Modern as it was there.’** She worked hard and she was good at sport **‘I was good at a lot of things but ... I enjoyed sport, ... I left school then at fifteen. I was going to go back - trying an exam for the Technical .. College in Pontardawe ... but my father was out of work, my sister was getting married, ... so I went to help. I could have gone back – I should have gone back.’**

3.40

So you decided to go to work.

So I decided to go to work. And I had the job.'

Her first job was in F.W.Woolworth, Morryston – she worked there for about two years. Her wages there – they started off at £1.7s.6d (or £1 7s 9d) – she remembers because she would walk to the Cross in Pontardawe and she had a weekly ticket to Morryston which cost her 7s 6d a week. **'I used to have to give 10s to my mother'**. Her mother would save 25p (5shillings) for her and the other 5 shillings would help out with the house.

She left Woolworths' and got a job in the Tick Tock Factory in Ystradgynlais – as a young girl – she wasn't married at the time. She went there because she was **'earning a lot of money then ... compared to shop work.'** When she left Woolworth she was earning £2 17s or something like that (under £3) but when she went to Tick Tock she was earning **£7 a week.** **'I remember my husband was an apprentice and we got married ... he hadn't quite finished his apprenticeship as a mechanic, and I was bringing home more money than he was. But of course we were on bonuses then at Tic Toc, or Smith's Industries at it was called. ... I was in the clock department (not watches).**

Bonuses meant that you got your basic pay but if you did more than the target you could earn extra money. **'Because you'd put your tickets in and then you'd earn your extra money on those tickets.'**

7.04

The speaker finished at Tick Tock because she was pregnant with her son. She had worked there for about seven - eight years. She had her daughter a year later and for that time she didn't work. She did sign on but she didn't work. **'I don't think they were very happy to employ a young woman with three (?) children.'** But as they went to school – the youngest went to Rhydyfro primary school when she was just over three, and she took a job up in the Berlei's – in the canteen in school hours. In fact she worked in 'Economics' and then went in the Berleis.

She got the job in the Economics Factory – **'People just used to say – Hey, they're employing in Economics ..'** Her mother said she would look after the children. The wages here were similar to the Tick Tock – basic wage, but she didn't have to pay any bus fare – she would walk there. The Factory was in Pontardawe – in the area where Cwm Tawe school is today. There is still a stone which they can't move there and which was part of the Economics Works or the tinplate works. In this factory they made the drums for the Mond Nickel Works in Clydach. She didn't know anyone there when she first went there. Laughs when asked whether she had an interview for the job. It was more **'When do you want to start? That's how it was in them days – you could walk from one job to another. ... the big firms were always taking on.'**

10.36

What were your first impressions of working in this place now then?

She compares it with Tick Tock where she was working in the assembly there, and says ‘it was dirty’. **‘I had a band up your arm, pair of gloves on, cleaning the drums, down by the pit spray shop (?) and it was noisy. You had to shout. When you were talking, you had to shout. .. Then I went on to the riveting machine and I also worked what they called – I know it sounds silly – this was called The Moon - you pulled the guard down and this big press used to come down and make this ... all it was the lids for the drums,’** These were made from steel – so they had to wear protective gloves to handle it, you put the piece of metal in and the big press would shape it into the lid. **‘It used to come down and make this horrendous noise. I used to put cotton wool in my ears half the time because of the noise. ...They wouldn’t give them any protection - ‘no protection, oil on the floor, grease here and there – no protection and no canteen.’**

They did give them the gloves and things to protect their arms – heavy plastic covers for the arms. No uniform – she took an apron in herself. She went and bought ,like a ‘carpenter’s’ apron, which had pockets in the front so that she could keep any tools she would need in them.

13.25

Did you enjoy that job?

No, I just went there to work to get some money to go on holidays. I didn’t enjoy it at all.

They used to be moved from machine to machine in the factory and she used to think **‘It’s my turn next week – we did it in turns you see, It’s my turn .. you didn’t want to go on it.’** The Moon was huge – the lids were round and shiny and they looked like the Moon. This was their nickname for the machine. Women, men and boys working there – in the spray shop .. About 40 there altogether. Quite a few of these were women – **‘We used to go down to the Legion at dinner time ... to pick up chips or something.’** You could go out the back to have your break. You could smoke at your bench when you were working **‘It didn’t make any difference.’** There weren’t any No-smoking rules then.

Claims that when she started in Tick Tock – the first time, you could smoke by your machine. In spite of the noise in the Economics you could chat by raising your voice, **‘And that’s why I’ve always had a louder voice, ... in those days, if you wanted someone to hear you, you had to shout ... you could always tell factory girls because they were loud – to girls who worked in - like offices and shops. ... “Listen to that lot!”. ... I’ve always taught my children, “Nobody’s better than you and you aren’t any better than anybody else – everybody is equal.” ’**

15.26

Asked whether there was any training for the job, The speaker responds **‘You must be joking. You had to learn off the one who was next to you.’** That was the case in Tick Tock

– the first time – just follow somebody else – trying to make the work quicker for themselves
‘An operator will always find the easy way.’ She calls the top staff **‘the hierarchy. We never saw the Manager, it was your foreman and linesman. They were O.K.’** –

**** She is actually discussing the first time she worked at Tick Tock here **** **She remembers that the foreman called her once ‘Hey –You!’ She didn’t answer – he also called her Mrs after she got married. Then he came down and said ‘M*** – office.’ And she can remember that all the maintenance boys were working nearby and she walked in and I said ‘Yes?’ and he said ‘Next time I call you,’ he said ‘ you answer. You don’t look at me and ignore me.’ And I said, ‘And next time you call me, my name is either M*** or Mrs **** to you, but I’d prefer Mrs **** from you ... and don’t you ever speak to me like that again.’** They thought they knew the job better than them **‘but you were the worker and you knew the job better than them. ... They’d be careful how they talked to the men.’ ‘It was a union run place anyhow.’**

She believes her pay was something similar as in Tick Tock in the Economics but here you couldn’t make your money up. No pay rise when she was in the Economics. Paid in cash – with a payslip and a pay packet. ‘You used to flick to see whether the notes were right.’ The money was spent on her young family. No perks. No unions in the Economics.

The conditions, as compared to conditions today, were dangerous. They would have been shut down because Health and Safety. She had to take her shoes off before going into her own home **‘because the base of the shoe, and change my clothes straight away, because you’d be smelling of .. oil ... from oily rags .. you had to go right down inside (the drums)**

22.30

The speaker can’t remember any injuries in work. No rules – just that you worked.– As long as you did your work they didn’t bother you. It was a cold place to work, ‘cold’. They had hanging lights but also windows the other end. No changing rooms – you worked in the clothes you went down with in the morning. Toilets – someone cleaned them. She tried not to use them. They went to the toilet in the Legion! Worked Fridays (?) from 7.30 – 4.30. No shifts. Clock in and clock out – no overtime – cards in machines. Lunch break and then **‘you might have a sneaky ten minutes if you’re clever, see. .. Sneak out and have a fag – when you have got to go to the toilet (Laughs).’** But she can’t remember breaks in the morning. The factory was shut down for holidays. She didn’t stay there a year to have a holiday. If she wanted a day off for a funeral etc – **‘I didn’t ask.’** You weren’t paid then. **‘I didn’t want to take any days off because I didn’t want to lose any money.’**

They did go for nights out – someone would organise them. She didn’t go on every do, because she wanted to out with her husband. The factory didn’t organise them. You’d always have a Christmas do – but not with the bosses – somewhere in Ponty. All the pubs in Ponty would have a sing song then. She didn’t enjoy working in the Economics – she’d had enough **‘I’d just had enough. I thought I’m not doing this anymore. I went on sick.’** She didn’t

have a farewell party – she didn't want one. She got on well with her work mates **'you've got to. To work in a factory you've got to be fit, you have to stand up for yourself, ... because if you don't, the other workers will crucify you and ride on you. It's not bullying – it's just that they say 'She can do it, she can do it ' ... They did it to me and I said 'I'm not doing it. ... It was a different era. Remember, women were the underdogs to the men in those days. They weren't equal to the men. ... more equal today than it was then.'**

28.30

She is not in contact with the 'girls' she worked with then. Most of them were older than her – she was probably the youngest there.

What were her feelings about the Economics factory?

'Looking back I was a fool to work there. Because no young girl today would do what we did. .. They would think it was absolutely horrendous if they did it today. They couldn't do it – because you're not used to that kind of work – working conditions. ... It was horrendous compared even with the Tick Tock where I had worked in earlier.'

In Tick Tock the first time – it was absolutely horrendous even though she could smoke, eat and drink at the machine if she wanted to – because she wasn't dealing with small components in the clocks – not as in the watches section. **'I remember seeing a women, she used to smoke – we used to watch her – she had a fag in her mouth and she'd be puffing away and the ash would be still on the cigarette until she came to the end.'**

30.22

Next, the speaker moved to **the Berlei UK Factory in Pontardawe** – she can't remember how she got the job. They were taking on trainee sewing machinists but when she went there, the Personnel Officer, Mrs Griffiths, told her that the only job going was in the canteen. This suited her as it was from 9 until 3 and she had three small children in school. Her friend used to look after her children after school but by the time they got home she would be home for them. She used to run up Gelli-gron Hill to work in the mornings.

Berlei's made bras and corsets. It used to be situated in the old (Ice) Rink Dance Hall in Pontardawe, before they built a factory where the old Pavilion picture house was.(details of sites). They used to get sales stuff from Merthyr **'That was great. We used to buy bras for sixpence. The old sixpence. To buy them out they were costing about £15'**. She knew many people working there because they were Pontardawe girls of her age. She had an interview with the Personnel Officer. She enjoyed working there – she worked there until it closed – 10 years. But she only went there because they were going on holiday – to work for a few months, just to have money for the holiday. When she went there she was only earning £3-4 because of the hours in the canteen. She wasn't on piece work on the shop floor where **'The more you worked – the more you were paid.'** Maybe her pay was £10. She worked

there for ten years and she became the Canteen Manageress and she was bringing home £150 a week – bringing this home. **Berlei's - they were top payers. They were better than the Tick Tock.** Berlei's closed around 1981 and then she went back to Tick Tock for 16 years until around 1998. **'I can't remember dates – proper dates now'**

35.42

Berlei's - There were rows of women on the machines in the production section , then there was the examiners' place and **'the whole side down here, were all toilets.'** About 10-12 ladies and one gent. **'But when you went in and locked the door the light would come on outside so they knew exactly how long you'd been there.'** The only men in the factory were the Manager and 2-3 maintenance men. The rest were all women: 3-4 in the offices, the Personnel Officer and then all the girls and supervisors on the shop floor. In the canteen there were 3 women – all the girls knew you (in the canteen) and she knew the names of all the girls but she didn't really know them. She sees some of them today and they say **'I'll always remember your mashed potatoes ... she used to make the best mashed potatoes in Ponty.'** She was making meals and sandwiches and breakfast – toast and pasties. She'd make chips, cottage pie, cawl – lots of things for dinner. No frozen stuff. She suggested sausage, mash and peas and this was popular. You worked with what you had in stock. When they had frozen foods in they had to rotate the foods to make room for the new stock. They put the machine on for doing the potatoes in the afternoon, ready for the following day.

There was one union in the factory – Tailors' – but can't remember which one it was. **'If you worked, you had to be a member of the union. You had no option. .. If you didn't pay your union the others could go on strike and say "We're not working with a (non)-union person. The unions were getting stronger then. .. In those days unions were strong. ... They also gave legal rights as well, you see, ... it's for your own benefit to be a member of the union. I would never work in a place that's got a union and not be in it. '**

Not aware of any disputes - not in the canteen but maybe on the shop floor. When they had their Christmas do the Manager was there. Any do – they would invite the Manager.

40.55

In the canteen they wore overalls and head gear. These were provided for them. Health and safety regulations were just coming in. It had to be clean and you couldn't smoke downstairs – they could smoke in the canteen. The whole top of the building was a canteen (now a gym) – no non-smoking rules then. But they couldn't smoke on the shop floor, by the time they came up for their break they were ready for a smoke and cup of tea. The chip pan in the kitchen caught fire once, but they knew what to do because they had fire-drills – they smothered it with a fire blanket and called the fire brigade. First aid – she had to do a course herself in the canteen in the factory. It had to be done after work. After the Economics – ten years later - because she was the Manageress she had to do First Aid – about 1975-6.

Did you play music in the canteen?

All day – it's good for doing the floor. It's not very good when you've got very slow music on. When she first went there she was out with the tea - making the tea for break in the morning - there would be three breaks in the morning, two in the afternoon. They couldn't have kept up with the toast if there hadn't been more than one break! They worked all morning until about half past one – quarter to two. when they would sit down to have their food. Morning break – **'If we hadn't done the potatoes (the day before) Oh God! We knew we had a panic on.'** There was a machine to do the potatoes. Huge one which took two to handle. After everyone had gone they had to clean everything. (Contradicts herself - there was no afternoon break). The workers went home at four o'clock. They had a quarter of an hour break in the morning. They didn't work shifts but some worked overtime and they would come in at half past four for tea. But they could help themselves now – she made sure that they had poured their tea and the urn was off before she went home.

46.25

I always remember mopping the floor – and if there was a slow, slow song, ... you'd mop the floor and you were doing it to the music. I used to love the rock and roll ones – you used to go like anything to the rock and roll.' A big area to wash, but she only did the top half every day. The rest was brushed and washed once a week – except if there was a sale on. She would put a Wet Floor sign up – just beyond the telephone on the wall for outgoing calls.

Sales were held every few months. They used to sell material in them too. **'It was brilliant,'** She asked if she could have one but was told she could have two – because she was moving house (she's still got them) – solid thick plastics.

Once again they used to shut down for a fortnight and for Bank Holidays – no Mayday in those days. At Christmas they used to have – the first time in Tick Tock she had to work Christmas Eve; and New Year's Eve **'It wasn't very nice if you were going out.. And if you didn't turn in on Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve you'd lose the money for the whole week.'** She used to love it when Christmas was on a weekend – Finish on Friday, Christmas Eve on Saturday – then Sunday and Monday off – not back in work until Wednesday, and then the same thing for New Year. The first time in Tick Tock you had to be in work the day before and after a Bank Holiday or you wouldn't have your Bank Holiday money.

In Berlei's you could take days off for a funeral etc. But she can count on her hand the number of days off she took.

51.15

Social activities were organised by the workers and by the management in Berlei's. They used to have Christmas does organised by the management and they would be there and also the office. Retirement does, and plenty of hen parties – any excuse for a night out and because they all knew her in the canteen she would be invited to them all. **She went on one outing – organised by the Berlei not just for Pontardawe but for the whole Berlei**

organisation in the UK. A trip to London. Merthyr people were getting on the train in Cardiff – she left the house at about seven o'clock in the morning and caught the train in Swansea. And she remembers getting off the train (in London) and over the Tannoy system she heard ‘Welcome from Swansea and Cardiff – all the Berlie employees. ... It was hilarious!’ They went to Trafalgar Square – Pat, Pam and herself, and Doris (a Cockney) – a car backfired – the pigeons all rose and they all ducked down. She shouldn't have been afraid of pigeons because her father kept them. They took photographs. They didn't know where to go so they asked a policeman and he was a Welshman from Barry! **‘Mind, a lot of things went on I can't repeat them.’**

When they had the retirement does **‘You didn't have to have entertainment!’** She worked with several characters – especially Doris in Berleis who was a diabetic and one day she went to talk, and she had false teeth and they bounced off the counter in front of everyone. There wasn't a sports club – but they did have a **Sporting Day – they went up to Merthyr and had a netball competition** - she took her children and they supported the team She didn't play herself. No Christmas party for the children.

The factory closed and although a new company – Cohen? was taking on, she decided to leave. **‘I didn't fancy being down on the machine at that particular time’.** She had some redundancy money and she took it.

57.55

Did you have a farewell party?

Oh yes – I think we had three or four – for different groups you see! Again she mentions Doris as a character. They used to prepare a Christmas dinner in the canteen for all the workers – over a hundred of them. The office staff came up to help and some of the supervisors – to help lay tables. She was organising the food and they had the gravy in huge catering pans. Doris was stirring the gravy and she had an awful habit of singing – she dropped her teeth in the gravy. Everybody was panicking, but the speaker asked ‘Doris where are your teeth?’ ‘In my hand!’ She threw a tea-towel at her and it landed on the gas and went on fire! It ended up in the sink. **‘It was a laugh a minute .. and I couldn't tell you everything that went on there – it's unrepeatable.’**

She didn't receive a gift in her retirement do.

After the Berlei's she decided to stay home – because it was school holidays and her daughter thought that was great. But when she went back to school – she was the youngest – it was very quiet. Her husband was a long distance lorry driver – away from Monday morning until Friday – Jane, her daughter was – also in the Berlies, but she moved on, her son Steven was home and her youngest daughter. But she was bored now – she signed on for about six months– and then she decided to take a course to be a sewing machinist in the college in Port Talbot. She did the course and was fully trained as an overlocker – machinist. She had a week off to get her house back in order after the course. She got travelling costs for

going on the course. The course was a fair amount of weeks. Then her friend called one day and said **'Hey, they're taking on up in the Tick Tock' – this was in January 1983.** They phoned and were invited for an interview. She and her friend went up. **It was casual - ... which meant they could let you go – after a big order to clear that – under six months.'** She decided it would be worth doing to get money for the holidays because they used to go to Pontins (Torquay way, Rhyl, Southport) with the kids on holidays. The children used to go down the beach – though you never saw the sea in Southport! During the day and they would be in the club. She used to enjoy the holidays in Pontins. A crowd of them used to go – about 7-8 cars.

1:06:00

This was the best interview she ever had. **'I'll never forget that interview.'** They called the foreman in. She was asked whether she'd worked there before and who her foreman was. She replied 'Jack Barber'. Then they asked 'Do you know a Glen Griffiths?' – he was still there! He came to the interview because the job was in his department. But he said he couldn't remember her although they had worked together under Jack Barber – he had been the linesman on Jack Barber's lines. Then he said 'Blond! Good God! You've put on some weight haven't you!' She said 'That's not very nice is it?' But she was told she could start the next week. 'I see you've still got the blond hair.' 'And I'm still the same person, Glen, as I was then.' She replied. He'd asked her to go out with him and she'd said no! It was a strange interview – she was asked to wait outside while they discussed her. She didn't want to work for Glen Griffiths as her foreman – 'Nice bloke mind, as long as you handled him right – on the female side.' She was called back in and as Glen walked past her **'he whacked me one across my backside (with a paper).** **'See you Monday', he said.'** **And I said 'I see you haven't changed.'** **That's how he was and you just had to take him as he was.** She stood up for herself. She worked with Glen.

She started off stamping things – the Renault signs – put it into a machine, stamped it and then pulled it out. **'My waist line became marvellous' – because she had to bend down – then up - all day long. And 'I was on a high chair ... then I had to stand,'** She used to **stamp the Renault signs that went on the dashboards.** The linesman (Bryn) came to her one day (Glen was the foreman) – she was about to be moved to another section. She'd been told 'Tell (the speaker) , wherever she's told to go, not to argue.' The section she was on was all being split up. Some of her friends were going over to the other factory on the same site. The factory she was in was making speedos for cars now. She was put on inspection for the speedos – the old speedometers. **From there she worked on the Rover works. The factory has always been called the Tick Tock (although changed). In the Rover works she was working on fuel gauges and another gauge. They had to be right. They did the police cars and they had to go in on Saturdays and Sundays to do the police cars. You wouldn't start them until Friday. There was no smoking at your bench this time round. And you had to go to the rest room for your food – you couldn't sit at your bench to eat any more.**

1:15:15

The speaker's son came to work there too. Before that she worked on quality and before that on ?risk – making the wiring for your cars – Rover and Honda. She worked on the Honda section. When she went into quality and then she went on a course over to Cimla - a cell controller course – as a supervisor’s course. She had a job as a cell controller. **If you wanted the job of being team leader (they were changing the title of the jobs) ... you had to go to college in Swansea and ‘I was fifty two having my cap and gown ... business management’. ‘I was earning terrific money when I left there - terrific money. ... and you know, you go S1, S2 3 – the grades with the pay and I was within one – the year I finished was my assessment thing with the boss to have my next grade which would be the highest grade of all.’**

Her son came to work there – in another department. They were changing the fixed boards she was working on for carousels. She went to ask whether she could go on the carousel (because one boy had moved down). and the boss said ‘Well, no you’re in charge of that.’ She was the fixed board specialist – she was the only one who had worked on mains (?) harnesses – harnesses to cover everything in your car – for Honda. **‘I was the only one now with this knowledge, of actually doing it from start to finish.’** This was because she was on quality before it was actually built – before it went into production. But when it went into production she wasn’t released and the unions had to step in to say that she had to be paid straight away and not lose a month’s pay – she lost weeks of the higher pay.

She went down to the other line (where the boy had left) – her son worked on this line too – no problem. **I said to him “Just remember from half past seven ‘til four o’clock, I’m not your mother I’m your boss.’ He said “You’re the boss whether you’re my mother or not!’ I said “Don’t take me for granted Steve ...”**

But then one day he and the boys - **‘As boys are - you had to watch the boys more than the girls to be honest with you, they left before the buzzer went for them to go for break, you see. So when they came back I thought I’m going to give them a row – all of them ... because one or two of the girls had gone as well – crafty ... to get food from the canteen.’** She did so and she told her son that he didn’t have any privileges over the others. And then Tyrone told her son **‘Listen now, I’ve been a supervisor and on times they will call your mother some names - “ which they do “How would you feel if one of the boys, or the girls – more so the boys, - and they told your mother to ____ off’ ‘I’d kill them’ he said.** And so her son went down to work with Tyrone and stayed there.

Eugena thanks the speaker for telling all about all the places she has worked and congratulates on working herself up to have a degree.

‘The only thing is I wish I had done it – gone on and done it from school and then I would have earned big money when my children were growing up and they would have benefitted from it – if I’d earned more money. But you don’t realise things at fifteen.’