

## VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/ LLEISIAU O LAWYR FFATRI

Mettoys, Fforest-fach (1954 or 1955) and Hodges, Fforest-fach – summer work

**Interviewee:** VSW031 Annest Wiliam

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**Interviewer:** Jenny Sabine on behalf of Women's Archive of Wales

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She worked in a factory between school and college, when she was 17 or 18 years old – in 1954 or 1955. It was a summer break. 'We didn't go off on year long things in those days.' But in the summer holidays most people took jobs to earn a little bit extra or Christmas time.

She decided she could do with filling in her time that summer, so she went down to the labour exchange, and asked for a job. In those days there were lots of jobs around, and a job came up in Fforest-fach in a factory called Mettoys, which is no more. They made metal toys, in the days before plastic. They used conveyor belts. It was a huge factory – like a massive hangar, with very little lighting (as she remembers it), in terms of natural light. The long strips of conveyor belts. The toy Annest was working on was called 'The Farmer's in the Dell' – this consisted of a sort of base, which was a farmyard and on that you put the farmhouse. The base would come down the conveyor belt, and behind you there'd be a stack on a sort of trolley, which was re-filled every so often, - a stack of farmhouses. So what she had to do was to put the farmhouse on the base. Also on the base was a sort of thing which you wound, to make the tune, and to make the animals turn round and make the animals come out of the farmhouse. It was a nice little toy. But the thing was **'we had to fit a farmhouse on to the base by folding over these tabs, which were metal, underneath the base, and because this was quite hard, difficult really, we were told we had to bring gloves, leather gloves, otherwise our fingers would have been shredded doing all of that. So, we didn't think to ask whether we could have gloves provided.'** So they brought their own and if they got shredded they brought others.

3.58

She didn't shred her fingers, but she did have terrible scratches on her gloves. The worry was that you might have too many bases coming down the conveyor belt and not enough houses

to go on them, or the other way round **‘and I found that a bit stressful I must say, you know, there was an inexorable quality to it.’** But the people either side of her were fine.

She clocked in in the morning. She caught the six o’clock bus from the Uplands, got up there for half past and clocked in and then she was taken to the conveyor belt, and told where to stand, what to do, **‘and then it was left to me’**, and to the other women and girls, to show her what to do, **‘They were great’**. The girl on the left had just got there from Woolworth and the woman on the right was married and was very kind. **‘She really took me under her wing.’** **She told her to bring her own mug in for tea, and to be sure that when the whistle sounded for break, that she got over to the tea urn straight away, and get her tea, otherwise when the quarter of an hour was up and the break over, she might be stuck in the queue. ‘So it was quite regimented’.**

She thinks her shift was from 6.30 to 1.30? - so there wasn’t a lunch break. One quarter of an hour break only. **‘They were very nice and kind to me’** - Annest was aware they might be scathing about students coming thinking they knew everything.

6.02

Annest can’t remember her target. But the time and motion man would have worked that out. **The workers were terrified when the time and motion man came around – they all had to sort of smarten up, ‘it was like it was a test, an exam on them personally.’** A rumour came around that he was coming. And **‘this inoffensive little man turned up with a clipboard’**. He was quite young – in his twenties.

Then further down the conveyor belt, on her right, was someone who checked all these farms. **And the way they did it was by turning the little handle thing to make the music come out, and it came out ‘”The Farmers in the Dell, the Farmer’s in the Dell (sings!) Hei ho hei ho, The farmer’s in the Dell Sometimes it went backwards which was nightmarish! And I did have nightmares about it, and I remember dreaming (about) people going ‘Farmer’s in the Dell ...”**

She thinks they were all doing the same thing, so if she missed a base the woman next to her would do the next base. The other conveyor belts were doing different toys.

**‘It was good times, ... I suppose I was young enough and strong enough to stand at a conveyor belt for all those hours with just the one break and not worry about it.’**

**Even the time and motion man – even though they made it sound scary ‘It made their day, it added a bit of variety.’**

8.57

**‘I got paid £4 a week,’** She thinks the others who were permanent and experienced, probably got more. She thought the wage was great for her. She was working between July and September.

Other years she went to work in another factory – Hodges, also on the Fforest-fach estate. That was nice because it was a gents' outfitters. She was on the switchboard. She did enjoy this because it was like a skill, though she made a lot of mistakes. It was quite interesting and better than being on the conveyor belt. She would have been paid weekly with a payslip /packet – in money. She clocked in and **'it was highly regimented'**. She can't remember anybody objecting, or any sort of union trouble. She didn't join a union. **'I know that, you know, the women were very sort of alarmed or in awe of management, the time and motion man was part of management. ... If a man appeared, they were all women as far as I could see, on the floor, ..**

**Were you aware of hierarchy among the women?**

**No, I wasn't .. because the girl on my left was just the same as the woman on my right., who'd been there much longer, you know.'**

She's uncertain about there being a supervisor, yet someone must have told her what to do and how to do it. As a student she just filled in a gap. **'It suited the people either side of me for me to be as proficient as possible, so they didn't have to do the work, so they made sure that I knew what to do.'**

12.10

It was noisy, but they had tannoys – the usual sort of **'Music while you Work'** and they would sing along and laugh and talk and chatter. She would have been bored if she'd stayed any longer, the fact that she thought she wouldn't be there long, made it quite entertaining.

She can't remember anybody smoking – she thinks you would have had to choose whether to have a cup of tea or a cigarette during the break. You could leave your post but **'you had to be very careful. ... It was frowned on .. somebody else would be covering for you obviously, so you didn't want to let the others down.'**

She can't remember a rest room there. The tea was brought round to where you worked. An urn was brought round on a trolley – you had to rush to queue for your tea. You had to have a cigarette, go to the toilet and have a cup of tea in the quarter of an hour after the whistle went.

There must have been a canteen there for workers who worked there over lunch but she didn't see anything at all. **'I've got no memory of anything except standing at that conveyor belt.'** She did actually leave the conveyor belt once because it was a big day – this group of actors came around, and again the rumour came down, **"There's some strangers in the ... there's some people in .. They're in a show in the Grand",** and so I pricked up my ears, because that's what I would have loved to have done, was to have been in a play, and so, I could see them wandering around, and I thought, **"I'll go .. I'll risk getting the sack,"** and I left the conveyor belt and I chased after a couple of women who were sort of straggling the tour around and I said **"I want to be an actress, what can I do? How can I go about it? "** They were so amazed at somebody coming from the

conveyor belt and finding them, - they'd been to RADA and they told her to apply for an audition. 'It was so thrilling for me, really, ... I was absolutely starry-eyed.'

16.25

She certainly did not, absolutely did not get to know the management. **'They were not exactly the enemy, but you know, you understood that you weren't to speak to them or have anything to do with them at all. And if you had I think you might have been regarded as suspicious.'** Being nice to the time and motion man would have been frowned upon.

Any dishonesty? **'Having seen the toys, they were just awful! I can't imagine anybody actually wanting to take them home.'** Maybe some did, maybe some were a bit defective and would have been thrown aside, but she wasn't of an age when she would have been interested in that and it wasn't Christmas time.

She doesn't know about the packaging.

She doesn't think there was any harassment. She can't remember doing overtime.

She paid her own bus fare – about one shilling - from her wage of £4. The bus dropped her at the Eaton lights in Fforest-fach, and she walked down the road towards the estate. **'I've got a vivid memory of that – nice feeling actually.'** There weren't many other workers on the bus – she thinks most of the people employed there were very local. She thinks most of the women were married women. **'And I think there were a lot of jokes that went way over my head.'**

She didn't meet any other student but there had been some there. Some of them only stayed a day or two so they were quite pleased that she seemed to fit in and stayed the six – eight weeks she was there.

21.02

**'I did have a certain sort of pride in feeling I'd actually made something with my hands. ... even though it wasn't anything very valuable. .. Yes, I've done a day's or a shift's work. I did have a good feeling about that and I felt I earned the money when I got it.'**

She thinks the money probably went towards clothes – **'clothes that I could choose for myself, and not get bought for me.'** She remembers that they used to go to the Grand Theatre every week and go to the Gods, and she needed money to do that. A gang of them used to go and see this rep company, and to the Palace Theatre as well. Mollie Sugden the actress was there from 'Are you being served', - in the Palace, and they used to have blue printed programmes which were very cheap obviously, and the Grand had very classy programmes.

They knew from the beginning that she was only there for a temporary job. If she left there were plenty of people to fill the job. Employment was very different those days. There was very little mechanisation really. There was no uniform, apart from the gloves. No hairnet. **‘Standing up all day was quite hard.’ She was just assembling – not making in any sense.**

She also worked in Hodges. Recalls the other factories – Corgi toys with a huge corgi on the roof. When the factory was dismantled the corgi appeared in a garden in Limeslade!

No interaction that she knew of with workers from other factories. No particular brand loyalty. She seems to visualise overalls and people bringing in their own overalls to wear. She can’t recall women in rollers. **‘Although it was half past six in the morning most of them turned up in make-up.’** Probably they wore very sensible shoes.