

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/ LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI

Pressed Steel Factory – Prestcold Fridges, Swansea 1961; Panelastic, Forest-fach 1961-1962

Interviewee: VSW032.2 Jenny Sabine

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Interviewer: Annest William on behalf of Women's Archive of Wales

Date of birth, 28 May 1940

Jenny was born in Bishopston but because it was wartime her father was overseas and her grandparents (mother's parents) lived nearby so she lived between her own home and theirs. She very seldom came into Swansea because of the war. 'My early memories of Swansea, towards the end of the war when it was bombed badly, .. I can remember standing – at one time you could see from St Helen's Road right down to Wind Street ... except for the Plaza Cinema where the Odeon stands now and Mount Pleasant chapel which was still standing, The rest was all black.' More about the Plaza.

She wanted to be a librarian and she left school when she was not quite seventeen, and she got a job in Swansea University library – an alternative to going to university by learning on the job. She took the first professional examination of the library association, and the idea was that she would then go to Library School for two years. But her father was old-fashioned and didn't want her to leave home. She also realised that she liked university library work rather than public library work, and that to get anywhere in a university she needed a degree, so she decided she would become a secretary '**a glamorous job in those days**', so she did shorthand and typing training, and she eventually got a job first of all in the Pressed Steel Factory making Prestcold fridges on Jersey Marine, which had opened in the late fifties. It was quite a new factory, a branch of the Pressed Steel Company, based in Oxford. It was called Prestcold because of the fridges. She thinks they made a few other domestic things but the main thing was fridges.

3.38

The building is still there – It was the Ford factory for many years, and now different things. Explains where it is. There's a row of four office blocks - at the furthest end there was a rotunda – a round glass construction which was the showroom, and this was for the top

management; then there was the first nail?? department and the next level of management. She was in the third block which was to do with the design of the fridges,. Doesn't know what the other block was. Behind there – was the shop floor – she never went there.

She only worked in the factory for about four months. She thinks she saw an advertisement in the paper and applied and had an interview. She doesn't remember much about the interview – no speed tests or anything. **But she does remember being sent to the health centre and having a check up with a nurse.**

The hours were from 8.30 until half past five (?). At this time she lived in Sketty, and getting to Jersey Marine meant walking down Ashley lane to Mumbles Road – so she had to leave home about seven, then she caught a bus from Mumbles Road to the bus station, then walked to the bottom of Wind Street, - at this time this area was pretty well in the docks, with railway lines in the road – ‘a no go area really’. She remembers walking down Wind Street and there was a railway bridge across and there were pigeons there, so you had to dash under there otherwise ...! Then she turned left and had to walk under the arches of the railway line, where there were workshops and she waited for the bus there, which took her to Jersey Marine past the Weaver's Building, through St Thomas and Port Tennant, along a single road then before they built the dual carriage way. Lots of the houses had been requisitioned and she remembers one man who refused to move out. And he spent a lot of time standing by his door.

When she got to the factory she remembers clocking in on a clock on the stairs. And **‘you had to clock out and of course, everyone got to the staircase well ahead of the time you were supposed to clock out, and there'd be crowds sitting on the stairs, so that the moment we were free to go we all rushed through with our cards and clocked out.’**

9.00

Although she started out at seven in the morning she always got there by eight. So she had half an hour before anyone else came – so she read to fill the time and her nails were manicured to perfection.

The factory was fairly new and all the men – all the middle management up who were men – had their own offices, their own secretary who had an office next door. So she had her own room adjoining his. But **‘there just wasn't much work to do. I used to spin my work out through the day. I could probably have got it all done by half past ten in the morning. I'd be called in to take dictation or write a letter.’** She worked for the head of design, so there were various letters and reports to do. She also remembers using a banda machine to make copies, - it was a horrible thing - you typed on to a special sheet with purple stuff on the back which was knocked on to another sheet, then this was put into this machine and you could roll off copy after copy. This purple stuff stuck to everything else too – went into your underclothes – little bits of purple. There was one photocopier and she remembers being asked to photocopy something on it (no, she corrects herself - this belongs to the other factory she worked in).

12.00

Because there wasn't much work they had long coffee breaks, no-one checked up on how long they spent on a coffee break. They used to visit each other,. She can't really remember her pay but thinks it was about £6 - £8 a week. This was in 1961 when she was 21. They were paid weekly and had to go down to the drawing office, where all the draughtsmen had their drawing boards, and the money was distributed there and they had to sign for it. It was cash in a packet.

If they needed a new shorthand notebook etc they had to go down to the same office with their old one to show that it had been used. You could keep the old one.

It was quite interesting going down to this office It was full of younger men working on technical drawings. There was a lot of visiting and it was very easy going. But then word got around that the people who worked in the first block – the upper management – that some of them were beginning to lose their jobs – rationalisation in the clerical department. Word got around that it would be worth looking for another job, rather than be made redundant.

So she moved on. **However one time when she was at Prestcold she was asked to do a sound trial, and she was taken into a small room with two men, one of the designers and ? someone from the shop floor, and there was a washing machine – they were just starting to make washing machines, 'and I, as a woman, had to say when the sound got too loud.'** She didn't have any equipment to monitor it but she just had to say when the sound was becoming too painful. She did this a couple of times. They used other women workers there to do this too. She does remember that it became high-pitched. **'That was one of the few occasions I had any contact with the end products'**. She didn't understand the technical side at all – she could have been working anywhere, and she typed the reports automatically. She did learn some technical terms which meant something to her at the time but she can't remember them now. **'It wasn't a job I took very seriously because very quickly I realised I needed to move on.'**

17.00

She wasn't aware of any union representation there. There was no connection with the factory floor. Even the threat of redundancy was very informal. The assumption was they would work down from one block to the next to make efficiencies. With clerical work, you would have to apply for a new job, not just walk in as happened in factories, but the paper was full of advertisements, and they weren't very particular about your qualifications if you could do shorthand and type and were clean and tidy.

Her next job – she heard of it and applied and again had an interview.

In the previous job – the chap she worked for, Mr Morgan, was a very pleasant fatherly sort of man. There was absolutely no unpleasantness at all as far as she was concerned. Because the factory was way out of town, a lot of the men with cars gave people lifts. So she often had a lift home with him. But the car would be full of other workers too.

Some of the women there – one was married to one of the draughtsmen. Many of the men had come from Oxford to work there, and she had also come down from Oxford. But most of the clerical workers were from Swansea, and there was a certain amount of chatting to the younger men in the drawing office. She had loads of time on her hands, and her boss and all the other bosses turned a blind eye to this.

Attitudes to people on the factory floor? **‘I wasn’t aware of them.’** There was a road between the offices and the factory and she never went there. There was a canteen for those who worked in the offices, probably one in the factory too. She had no idea – she saw people in the bus queue, but she didn’t know them by name. **‘We had no contact with them in our course of work’.** There were between 12 and 20 other women working in the block she was in. There were about five office suites (boss and secretary); the senior manager in that block had a larger office and an older, more experienced secretary. It was very much department based.

She can’t remember any social events.

24.02

Her next job, which was very different, was on the Forest-fach estate. It was for a firm called Panelastic, a subsidiary of a firm in Leicester. They made the elastic net that corsetry is made from. In those days – even someone like her and she was pretty slim in those days **‘I wore a roll-on. It was part of growing up, .. to keep their stockings up, to keep their tummies, stop their bottoms wobbling a bit. You felt you were grown up.’** Lycra was just coming in and the expensive ones were made of lycra but the others were from rubber net, rayon thread or something.

She went there in October/ Nov in 1961 and she was secretary to the sales manager (a step up). She had her own office and an electric typewriter. She worked there for less than a year. She did a lot of letters, took dictation, and arranged his work. He spent two-three days in the factory a week but for the rest of the time he would be out on the road. From time to time they had visits from the managements of various corsetry companies. She remembers, Berlei, Kaiser Bondor and Marks and Spencers (one of the best customers) – she had to check the times of the Aust ferries (before the times of the Severn Bridge) because they dealt with some firms in Bristol. The ferry went according to the tide so she had to phone up all the time. Sometimes she had to arrange hotels for him.

On Thursdays she had to go down to the factory floor – this was a much smaller concern and the factory and the offices were in the same building, the managers worked in the front of the building of red brick and the factory itself was behind in a long shed. On Thursdays she would have to go down to the foreman on the factory floor, to get the sales figures for the week. They would try to include Friday figures each time! and at the end of the month they would include some figures from the next month! She couldn’t understand this. He would give her all these little docketts – little bundles with lots of figures on them; these were the yardage of the fabric and the colours and who it was to. And then she had to set these out – on

four sheets with carbon. She had to type out all these figures – very boring job – and they would be sent off to head office.

29.25

She had to keep records and file things **‘I also - what I used to enjoy, they used to have, these various magazines would come in, Women’s Wear Weekly which was a an American publication, and I had to check through these for relevant articles that might be interesting.’** She also had to deal with a lot of fabric cuttings, because corsetry is made up of a lot of different kinds of fabric, and also in those days you often have a matching set – of bra, pants and petticoat, - and all these things had to match, so you had elastic net, but also nylon or jersey which the main garment would be made of and the lace trimming and elastic band to go around the waist at the top of the pants – all these things needed to match, there wasn’t a huge range of colours, a lot of white and black and then, some pink and blue. **Marks and Spencers – one of their biggest customers was also one of the most discriminating. They used to have about four colours, but there were dozens of shades of white and even black. ... Some firms ... were very fussy about, they wanted to have a sample of the current week’s fabric, to make sure that the colour was consistent, so she had to send off all these little bits of fabric. Marks and Spencer had then every week, for every colour they ordered.** Most of the others had monthly samples.

Conditions – all men in management. When she went there she was the only female worker who had her own office. There was a London office too and her predecessor had moved there to be the secretary to the overall boss in the London office. (‘I don’t know how discrete I should be. She did have a relationship with her boss’).

33.20

There was an Australian connection – the managing director in Swansea was Australian. For some reason she worked upstairs while the other workers worked in a big office downstairs. Her room adjoined her boss’s, which was huge and where they had meetings. She thinks some of the girls in the main office worked for individual men too.

On the shop floor, the senior workers were men, but most of the machine operators were women. The men mainly looked after the machines and were moving around while the women stood at their own knitting machine. **They were incredibly noisy, it was horrendous.** Even in her office at the front of the building, with a passageway, and there were glass windows on the other side, which looked on to the shop floor – so there was only two panes of glass (the offices had glass walls) between them and the shop floor. She found the noise level difficult. **‘What it was like for people working on the shop floor, I hate to think.’** When she went down to collect the docketts **‘as you opened the door, the noise hit you.’** They didn’t have any ear muffs etc. **‘I’m sure it would have affected their hearing in later life, I sometimes wonder whether it has affected my hearing.’** The machines ran from Monday morning to Saturday. She can’t remember whether she worked on Saturday mornings. They might have worked the machines on Sundays too.

Easter time there was a good deal of disgruntlement because they had to work on Good Friday. The machines were stopped on Easter Sunday and Easter Monday.

36.54

She thinks they also had Easter Tuesday off. Tuesday instead of Friday – because they didn't want to stop the machines before the Saturday. They were knitting these long pieces of fabric and if they stopped the machine it would mark the fabric.

Disgruntlement – she saw a lot of the cook, because she would come up to give her some information in her office. She liked a chat and this is how Jenny learnt the gossip from the factory floor. Some of management were local – she thinks the firm was founded by an Australian.

At this time she was living in Derwen Fawr so she had to get a bus from there to Eversley Road, Sketty, then she walked up Sketty avenue to Glan-mor, and then caught a bus to Forest-fach and once there you could catch a bus down to the estate. **This bus would be full of women with curlers in their hair – this was the early sixties when bouffant and beehive hair (backcombed and high above your head) was fashionable. It would be set on these huge rollers, and a lot of women went to work with these massive rollers and a head scarf tied over it. They did their work like this. ... There was a lot of chat and repartee going on, between them and a lot of men there. 'Most of it passed me by, because ... I hadn't grown up in a situation where I would have understood a lot of the chat.'**

It was quite a cheerful time and she didn't have a sense of depression as far as work was concerned.

She was earning what she thought was quite good money by this time - £10-12 a week. **'I was given to understand that if I wanted to I might be able to ring up for a job in the London office.'**

42,12

But at the Christmas Party, I realised that there was a particular route to go to the London office – you had to be very nice ...' (Overnight).

Christmas party – but not for the shop floor workers of course. They would have their own. This was a party for managers and clerical workers. It was fairly paternalistic – a small firm. They all knew one another and she knew the more senior workers on the shop floor, e.g. the man who gave her the dockets came to her office and to meetings sometimes.

She doesn't recall there being a nurse there. **'I do remember ... and you know, I'm talking about the early sixties, I remember being in the main office ... talking to one of the other women there and she was sitting at her desk and I was standing and kind of leaning across her desk, and – my hands on her desk leaning forward anyway, and the chap who was the driver for the firm, who drove the ...van, and he came past me and pinched my bottom. And I said 'Stop it!' or words to that effect, and he said 'Oh the**

trouble with you is you're sex starved.' And everyone laughed. I was very annoyed but I realised I had a well, everyone laughed, it was just what was said.' .. That was the way things were in those days.

Were you offended?

I was. I was very annoyed, I can remember. I didn't like the man anyway, but that had nothing to do with it. I don't think that some of the men there would have dreamt of doing that whereas others would have, you know.'

And did the women sympathise with you?

Yes, I think they did. They didn't like it, but they didn't feel that they could – I mean I expect he did it to them too. But he wasn't told off or anything for doing it, and there was no suggestion that I could report this behaviour.'

46.05

She recalls the Christmas party again, - the second in command of the whole thing came down from London, and joined them for the party, **'and I remember him getting rather too close to me, and asking me what I thought of working in London.'** He didn't do anything ... and I felt 'Then she heard various stories and realised that that was how you got a job in London. **'And I would have loved to have worked in London, but not under those circumstances.'**

'I think the sixties arrived in Swansea very late!'

Going back to the bottom pinching incident – **'when people laughed, ... because I objected I was being, ??? there was just a gentle titter, ...**

One thing she remembers about this job was she had to start at nine, she still had to get up early because she had to catch two or three buses, that she was often asked if she would work on, because there was work to do and also because her boss was often late back (?), she often worked until half past six or seven, and she remembers on several occasions when he would ask whether she would mind working late and she was never paid any extra; there was no overtime because she wasn't on the shop floor, there was no union for secretaries in those days. He was a nice man, and he said 'I'll give you a lift home' which he often did, but on a number of occasions they had a meeting and this would go on and on. In the end she would go out and catch a bus home. She did this for months, once or twice most weeks.

In her interview they asked her why she'd only spent a few months at her previous appointment, and she remembers saying she wasn't getting any work and she was bored. Afterwards she regretted that because they obviously thought she was a soft touch. 'She'll do whatever you give her to do.'

Eventually she got fed up with this. She left for two reasons: she didn't think she passed the test for going up to London, they probably felt she was a bit straight laced- but she had a boyfriend at this stage. If she'd got married she would have been able to carry on.

51.32

One of the other senior men moved to work in Swansea and he appointed a secretary – a very nice girl. And she was given the electric typewriter and Jenny had an old sit-up and beg typewriter. This didn't produce such good work, but she got the impression that this was a bit of a demotion. Perhaps her work wasn't good enough but she felt that she hadn't measured up to expectations in some way. There was also a shift for her boss. (Strange background noise here – purring sound of cat!!) and she was collateral. She hated the old machine and she was getting ticked off for not presenting such good work.

At about this time a job came up in the university which combined being a library assistant and a secretary. She got the job and stayed there for about six years until after she got married and then went to Canada. **'I wasn't sad to leave Panelastic, but it was a very interesting time.'**

She does remember Christmas time the factory was right down the bottom of the estate, very near to the greyhound racing track was and she used to watch the greyhounds racing around – training – there were three buildings there (still there) the brick frontage, then the factory and ... At Christmas time there was a big Christmas party (as well as the one for the managers), in one of the other buildings, and they all went,. It was at lunch time, there were balloons and paper hats, and then they all went back to work. 'I'm sure there wasn't any drink or anything, but it was a Christmas get together.' It was for those workers of those three factories.

Another recollection – a second cousin's wife was a probation officer and she had a little blue Morris Minor car. One day she saw Sheila drive up the factory entrance – she couldn't understand what she was doing there. She challenged her about it the next time she saw her but was told that she shouldn't say anything because Sheila was visiting one of her clients in the factory. It was supposed to be confidential. She isn't sure whether the management or his fellow-workers who shouldn't know.

57.20

That was her industrial career before she went back to academia.

She had to catch buses because she hadn't passed her test yet. She practised with her father on Fairwood common. Having a car – very few of her friends had their own cars – couldn't afford it. Only the men bosses had cars. She often had a lift from the Finance Manager, who lived near her home – no unspoken message in this. It was quite common to have a lift.

She took sandwiches into work. **At one stage they had a lot of seconds roll-ons which they could buy for 15 shillings a roll on which was very reasonable. They were perfectly good roll ons.**

One time she had her purse stolen from her bag in her office – the money from it. Her office was open. It didn't occur to her to report it. The actual purse was stolen. Tells story.